

Great Performers

Friday Evening, September 30, 2005, from 6:45 to 7:30

Pre-concert lecture by James Hepokoski

London Symphony Orchestra
SIR COLIN DAVIS, *Conductor*
MONICA GROOP, *Mezzo-soprano*
RAIMO LAUKKA, *Baritone*
MEN FROM THE LONDON SYMPHONY CHORUS
JOSEPH CULLEN, *Director*

All-Sibelius program:
Pohjola's Daughter, Op. 49 (1906)
Kullervo, Op. 7 (1892)

JAMES HEPOKOSKI, Professor of Music at Yale University, is a specialist in symphonic and chamber music in the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He graduated from the University of Minnesota and went on to complete his graduate work at Harvard University, where he received the Ph.D. in 1979. After teaching at the Oberlin College Conservatory from 1978 to 1988 and the University of Minnesota School of Music from 1988 to 1999, he joined the Yale faculty in 1999 after two half-years of visiting professorships. At Yale he teaches a wide variety of music courses, ranging from two semesters of a much-praised survey of European music history (1600 to the present), to graduate and undergraduate seminars on Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Mahler, and many other composers and styles. Students have remarked on his "lively and entertaining lectures," which often illuminate central aesthetic and historical points embedded in the central classical repertory. An expert in musical style and its cultural implications, Professor Hepokoski has studied the music of Western European and nationalist cultures for decades, and he has also published widely on Italian opera. He has been the co-editor of a leading musicological journal, *19th-Century Music*, since 1992. He is the author of five books and several dozen articles on a broad range of musical topics.

James Hepokoski
Lincoln Center
30 September 2005

**Sibelius: *Kullervo*
(Colin Davis, London Symphony Orchestra)**

Welcome to Lincoln Center, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to this evening's concert, which features, above all, Sibelius's monumental early work, the *Kullervo* symphony for soloists, chorus, and orchestra, composed in 1891-92 at the age of 26. This is actually his first completed symphony, written about eight years before the official "No. 1" that we all know. This early *Kullervo* symphony is a fascinating and forceful work from many different points of view, but perhaps the most curious thing about it is that it stands alone in the entire repertory as a (1) watershed work in a composer's career, (2) a crucial event in the cultural life of a nation (talked about in Finland for decades thereafter), (3) a work with a colossal initial impact in 1892—but a work that was almost immediately withdrawn by the young composer (shelved for the rest of his life) and a work that remained set aside, suppressed, unheard for the next six decades. The huge piece, famous as it was by reputation, simply vanished ^{between 1893 +} until 1958—a year after the composer's death. I can't think of any comparable situation in any other composer's output. This is *Kullervo*: a five-movement, 75-minute "symphony" or "symphonic poem" (three orchestral movements plus two more with added voices) sketched in Vienna in 1891, completed in Finland in early 1892, and based on sections of the taproot poetry found in the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*. It opens like this, with ^{what is easily identified as} the "Kullervo the Hero" theme:

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 1, 0:00—1:21]

[original: Berglund, Disc 1, track 1, 0:00-1:20, fade-out]

The *Kullervo* symphony (or symphonic poem) was first heard on the 28th of April, 1892 in Helsinki, in the halls of what was then called Imperial Alexander's University. (Finland, of course, was at that time an autonomous grand duchy of Russia.) Sibelius himself was the conductor—Finland's young composer of promise, just starting his formal career. The monumental *Kullervo* was immediately hailed by Finnish-language newspapers as a

turning-point in Finnish culture, “the first living Finnish musical work,” and “Finnish from beginning to end.” Sibelius conducted it a second time the next day, and in the following year, in March 1893, there were three more performances of the complete work—always to tremendous local acclaim: young Sibelius as culture hero. So by 1893 there had been five complete performances of *Kullervo*. But at that point, and without giving a reason, Sibelius withdrew the work—perhaps thinking that he might revise it sometime in the next few years. Whatever the reason, he never did: it remained on the shelf, unrevised and unperformed for the rest of his life. There were only two small exceptions to this. Forty-two years later, in 1935, the centenary of the *Kalevala* epic, Sibelius consented to a single performance of the third movement only (the centerpiece): the 24-minute, *Kalevala*-based, choral movement, “Kullervo and His Sister”—which had originally made such a sensation as the first culturally accurate setting of the Finnish language. And what a sonority in this third movement! Elemental, ancient in character, rugged, quasi-primitive!

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 2, 0:00—1:08]

[original: Berglund, Disc 1, track 3, 1:25-2:30, fade-out]

But this ^{now-isolated} third movement was immediately withdrawn again after this single 1935 performance. Two more decades passed. And only a month or two before his death in 1957, Sibelius finally permitted a single performance of only a small fragment of the third movement, its very end, the final three-minute section known as “Kullervo’s Lament.” In that brief but powerful concluding monologue, we ^{hear} ~~learn~~ of the Finnish folk-hero’s overwhelming despair upon learning that he has committed incest with his sister (the stark tale unfolded in the third movement), ^{— An outcry of sheer stunned horror and pain: Woe my father — Woe my mother, and so on.} and his ritual suicide by plunging his sword into his own chest, “Woe, woe, my days! Woe to unhappy me and [woe] to all my household!” This very end of the third movement, then—its final one-eighth—was performed in 1957, “Kullervo’s Lament”

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 3, 0:00—1:09]

[original: Berglund, Disc 1, track 3, 22:35–23:42]

It was only after Sibelius's death in 1957 that the entire five-movement work—*Kullervo* as a whole—once again appeared before the public—in a 1958 performance conducted by the composer's son-in-law, Jussi Jalas. In historical terms, this was a moment of revelation for Finnish ^{musical} culture: the huge, legendary work of sixty-six years earlier, once again, finally, unveiled as a whole. A handwritten copy of the score was finally published in 1961—the basis for performances today; and I should add that now, in 2005, a critical edition of *Kullervo*—with corrections and careful editing by Glenda Dawn Goss—is just about to appear (any day now) in the important new complete edition of Sibelius's works being produced out of Finland. All Sibelians are waiting eagerly for it.

What can one say of such music? As you heard, this is elemental music; almost alarmingly explosive in its creative force, erupting like a force of nature; purposely rugged and crude, and very much attuned to the rhythms and sounds of the Finnish language, a manifesto of Finnishness. When considered by the cultivated European standards of the day—the sophisticated and contrapuntal standards of Brahms, Dvořák, Strauss, Mahler, and others—it would surely have been judged as unpolished, amateurish, seemingly awkward in many of its dramatic effects. And as our young 26-year-old composer was now planning to build a career and establish a reputation both locally in Finland and, ultimately, in larger Europe, he surely realized that (outside of the limited circle of ~~Finnish-language partisans~~ of Finland) this primitivist work was wide-open to “official” compositional criticism that could hurt his career in the long run. And so it stayed on the shelf, withdrawn and unrevised. But it is precisely what larger, international Europe would have objected to *then*—*Kullervo*'s blunt neo-primitivism, its orchestral and thematic crudity, its forceful directness—that draws us to this work today. To us, the work is a revelation about this wild young Sibelius and the creative powers that were erupting within him: an absolutely original musical art, explosive and as yet untamed

Perhaps the most central thing about *Kullervo*—in 1892 at least—was that its text is *defiantly* in Finnish. Let's think about this. As I mentioned, *Kullervo* was composed in 1891-92. In the late 1880s, young Sibelius was an almost exclusively Swedish-speaking Finn (Swedish was his mother tongue), and he was a flamboyant, eccentric student of composition at the Swedish-speaking Helsinki Music Institute. He grew up mostly in a Swedish-language environment at a time when the “language question” in Finland was heating up and building much cultural pressure. Within Finland, Swedish—a more international language, with cognates

in the other Scandinavian languages and with German—had long been the “official language” of education, the arts, and government. But in the 1880s and 1890s there was now arising a fiercely partisan intellectual movement to legitimize the very different, completely unique (but far less prestigious) Finnish language as the mainspring of identity and authenticity of Finland—a badge of pride and cultural separateness.

The document at the center of the Finnish-language partisans was the book that had come to be regarded as the bible of Finnish cultural authenticity: the *Kalevala*, the repository of centuries-old, ritualized Finnish folk poetry, epic tales of gods and heroes (the tragic Kullervo-story is among its longest), a book collected, stitched together, and published in the earlier nineteenth century by one Elias Lönnrot. Here in the *Kalevala*, the Finnish partisans insisted, was the collective soul and “truth” of elemental Finnishness. By the 1880s and 1890s their goal, ultimately, was to overturn Swedish-language hegemony and its cultural world, traditions, and authority and to replace it proudly with Finnish-language self-assertion and, ultimately, political independence from Russia.

To make a long story short, by around 1888 or 1889, the young, Swedish-speaking Sibelius had begun to fall in with a circle of Finnish-language partisans, even though he was by no means at that point comfortable with the language. And gradually—bit by bit—especially in his struggling year of study in Vienna in 1890-91 (when he was at last turning his attention toward orchestral composition), Swedish-speaking Sibelius became more and more sympathetic to the Finnish-language cause, convincing himself that he saw in it nothing less than the ethical truth about his own cultural roots. He was now studying that language and those touchstone *Kalevala* stories more thoroughly—along with Finnish folk music and its melodic and rhythmic patterns and moods. And so now the 25-year-old composer wrote from urban, cosmopolitan Vienna to his fiancée Aino Järnefelt in 1891 the words that must have delighted both her and her ardently pro-Finnish family: “I’m working now on a new symphony, completely in the Finnish spirit. This UrFinnish has gotten into my flesh and blood. . . . The Finnish has become sacred for me. . . . It is my conviction that a Finnish man shall feel and think Finnish.”

This was the year, then—late 1890 and early 1891 in Vienna—that Sibelius determined to define himself once and for all—turning away from traditional, international-style composition and striving now to construct a national musical language based on Finnish *Kalevala* sources. The result was the untidy but powerful *Kullervo*, which exploded like a bomb

in the midst of the Helsinki Finnish-language/Swedish-language culture wars in 1892. Let's listen to the conclusion of the final movement of this 75-minute piece—the colossal and tragic end of the story. Here the “Kullervo the Hero” theme returns in apotheosis, suggesting a musical immortalizing of this “authentic” figure from Finnish myth. The Hero's motive is celebrated one last time at the very end—in characteristically early-Sibelian, rough-hewn chunks of raw sonority—and the chorus also enters here at the end to provide the final lines, unflinchingly underscoring the ^{concluding} suicide-death of Kullervo in a static, almost shouted recitative of colossal and tragic proportions. This is the end of the whole piece:

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 4, 0:00—1:30]

[original: Berglund, Disc 2, track 2, 8:18-9:45, fade-out]

Imagine the stunned, initial applause in fervently partisan, politically awakening Helsinki in 1892: nothing like this had been heard before!—the first successful setting of the Finnish language to music, as if showing everyone how it could be done. And elevating in a stroke the artistic importance of the Finnish *Kalevala* as the heart of the enterprise.

Now, as for that iconic *Kalevala*, the source of the Kullervo-story, its claims to ethnic authenticity were high. The *Kalevala* was grounded in folk-recitation, marked by the reiterative trochaic tetrameter (_ . _ . _ . _ .) and by Finnish musical folk-formulas, repeated over and over again in folk-memory as the tales were told and retold from century to century. The nineteenth-century compiler of the *Kalevala*, Elias Lönnrot, had spent much of the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s in the regions of Karelia—eastern and southeastern Finland (now mostly part of Russia), which was understood to be the most ancient portion of Finland, the part most untouched by modernism. What Lönnrot was collecting were many different fragments of the old heroic tales of the Finnish gods and heroes, narratives that were recited to formulaic music by the rural folk, who had memorized them. So in the first half of the nineteenth century Lönnrot was transcribing the texts of peasants who were reciting parts of the *Kalevala* story to music that sounded like this folk-recording from a half-century ago:

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 5, 0:00—1:01]

[original: *Kalevala Heritage*, track 2, 0:00—0:57, fade-out:
the tale of Väinämöinen's Wounded Knee]

What would it have been like?—collecting and transcribing thousands of these over many years—then reconceptualizing ^{all the scattered fragments} ~~them~~ into some kind of reasonable narrative order as a whole, and stitching them piece by piece into a long epic, a poetic set of tales, sometimes adding bridges, transitions, and extra lines on your own—which is exactly what Lönnrot did in his production of the *Kalevala* in the nineteenth century. With this style of *Kalevala* ^{folk-} recitation we touch *the nerve center* of this construction of Finnishness, its most venerated claim of authenticity. The folk-musical line proceeds in the minor-mode; with back-and-forth repetition in short phrase pairs; with a stoic “sameness” or inevitability of effect; with a favoring of 5/4 meter (1 & 2 & 3 & 4, 5). Here’s another example, one historical document actually recorded a century ago, way back in 1905 (a field recording on a cylinder)—and this time let’s count the fives as our singer retells the story of the creation of the world from the *Kalevala*.

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 7 [sic], 0:00—0:41]

[original: *Kalevala Heritage*, track 5, 0:00—0:40, fade-out]

Now, in *Kullervo*, Sibelius didn’t literally imitate this ^{recitation -} style, but he was determined to capture symphonically what he regarded as the ethnic “truth” and spiritual essence of this stoical, repetitive sameness. Young Sibelius ^{in 1891-92} was now claiming to tap into the most ancient and authentic traditions of Finnish-language culture—its deep memory—while at the same time laying down a “modernist” symphonic statement of originality and making a decisive, even radical move in the Finnish-language/Swedish-language culture wars of the time.

Thus the very beginning of Sibelius’s *Kullervo* turns ^{decisively} to the wellsprings of the past. It’s as though the floodgates to primeval times suddenly open: out of the contained silence that precedes the piece, one gets the sense of a blocked dam breaking, a releasing of ancient and mythic floodwaters, a rushing and roaring rhythmic stream bursting in, churning up ancient memory—and leading, at once, to the surging, minor-mode primary theme, which clearly represents “*Kullervo the Hero*”—a theme that will recur several times later in the piece as a musical badge, a *Kullervo*-identifier:

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 8, 0:00—1:22]

[original: Berglund, Disc 1, track 1, 0:00-1:20, fade-out]

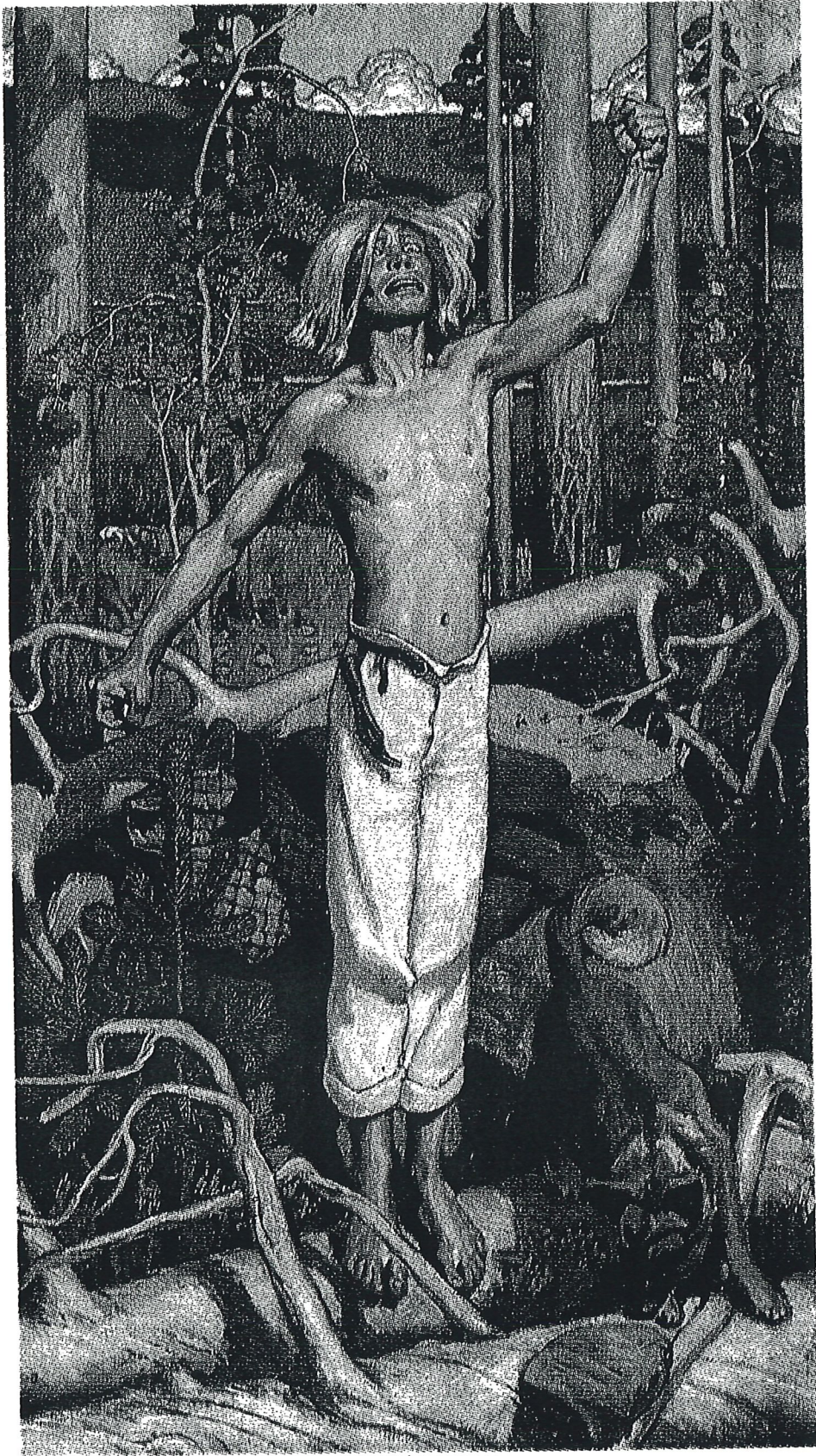
If the orchestral first movement—a sonata form—introduces us to the main character and “primitivist” mood of the piece, the tale of *Kullervo* proper unfolds in the remainder of the piece—orchestrally alone in movements 1, 2, and 4, and with added voices of *Kalevala* text in movements 3 and 5. You remember that when we heard the unadorned folk-recitation of parts of the *Kalevala*—our rural singer from 1905, for instance—we placed an emphasis on the unusual delivery of 5/4 meter, the presence of “fives” as a hallmark of Finnish recitation-delivery (1 & 2 & 3 & 4, 5). Well, in *Kullervo* that particular rhythm is not nearly so self-evident, although Sibelius was nonetheless obsessed with the idea of “fives” in this work—quintuple impulses—as a way, again, of driving to a spiritualized encounter with ancient things. It’s as if the “power of five,” the “irrational five” running against the grain of a European musical tradition that gravitates more naturally to groups of four and three, conveys an extra sense of strangeness and Finnish identity.

Here’s an example: The second movement of *Kullervo*, a purely orchestral movement, is entitled “*Kullervo’s Youth*,” tracing out the *Kullervo*-story from infancy to young manhood. It begins with a strangely ceremonial, ritualized theme—unforgettable in its strangeness—characterized by a longer note followed by five short ones, and treated to much repetition. (_____
----- _____-----). Cast also in the antique minor-key flavors of the dorian mode mixed with the aeolian mode, the theme gives us a sense of an ancient remoteness, an otherness—perhaps a magical, incantatory lullaby, the patient peasant-cradle-rocking of the young *Kullervo* with those rat-a-tat magic fives—also subject to characteristic *Kalevala* repetition and sameness, ritualized back-and-forth reiterations.

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 9, 0:00—0:59]

[original: Berglund, Disc 1, track 2, 0:00-0:56, fade-out]

This is the theme, of course, that grows, with *Kullervo*, in this movement. Before we ~~hear~~^{hear} an example of its growth, though, take a quick look at the famous image on your handout.



*Akseli Gallen-Kallela: Kullervo's Curse, 1899
186 x 105 cm, oil, the Antell Collection*

This is the painting of “Kullervo’s Curse” from 1899 by the celebrated Finnish painter and friend of Sibelius, Axel Gallén, or Akseli Gallen-Kallela in Finnish. ^{This intense} The image—now sometimes used on commercial recordings of *Kullervo*—suggests a primitive, symbolist approach to art, resonating perfectly with Sibelius’s “modern-primitive,” rough-hewn music of the period. His family slaughtered, the unfortunate Kullervo has been sold into slavery, serfdom, and has been betrayed yet again by Ilmarinen’s wife (Pohjola’s daughter), whereupon, once and for all, he ^{break out of his bondage and} rises up to swear eternal revenge and murder on his betrayers—hence the curse in Gallen-Kallela’s painting. In Sibelius’s purely orchestral second movement, “Kullervo’s Youth,” this curse-moment ^{is} ~~had been~~ suggested by a loud, fully-scored version of the lullaby-music that we just heard, now monumentalized into a decisive, shaken-fist curse of revenge—as if Kullervo’s tragic fate of bitterness and horror has been already forecast in the cradle. Here at mid-movement the incantatory fives blaze out fiercely, savagely, primitively:

a self-willed vow of revenge + emancipation!

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK 10, 0:00—0:42]

[original: Berglund, *Disc 1*, track 2, 8:32-9:10, fade-out]

Before Sibelius, most previous Finnish images or retellings of Kullervo had centered around these moments of slavery, betrayal, and curse. While at least the last of these appears implicitly in the second movement, as we just heard, it is more significant is that young Sibelius—as a “shocking” early-modernist and realist in the manner, say, of the controversial Henrik Ibsen—chose to emphasize the later, often downplayed portion of the story: Kullervo’s unknowing seduction of his sister; the incest scene itself; the horrifying recognition of their brother-sister relationship; and the subsequent suicide.

All that takes place in the great centerpiece of *Kullervo*, the ^{24-minute} third movement [^] choral-and-soloist recitation-recounting of the tale, “Kullervo and His Sister.” As for the presence of fives, you may not realize it as you listen to the rapid, scherzo-like opening, but the musical meter is a rapid 5/4....moving in quick, asymmetrical 5s (1, 2, 3, 4, 5), something of course that is more than evident to all of the orchestral players and conductors. Let’s hear it, and I’ll [try to] count it out for you. Remember: the mere presence of the irregular, “irrational” 5/4 time signature was for young Sibelius and his 1892 audiences a marker of Finnish difference and identity, stemming back to *Kalevala* recitation. *The opening of the 3rd mvt.!*

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK **11**, 0:00—1:03][original: Berglund, *Disc 1*, track 3, 0:00-1:00, fade-out]

^{Several}
~~Much~~ of the choral portions of this third movement are also cast in 5/4 meter or allude to 5s in other ways. But for now, let's just think about the unusual sonority that's so characteristic of the *Kullervo* symphony—and totally unlike any other larger-European precedent: male chorus singing not in harmony but in declamatory octaves, hurling forth the Finnish syllables with an unswerving inevitability. Sibelius seems to be suggesting that harmony, in ancient times, has not yet been devised—even as stark, harmonized chords in the orchestra push the music forward, punctuate, and underscore the unison declamation in the *forte* chorus. If anything in *Kullervo* is quintessentially Finnish, quintessentially “other” and strangely archaic and primitive, it is this sound—of the language itself, of the unharmonized, vigorous chorus, of the “raw” orchestra beneath—the voice of the past, of the primordial Finnish-language community, also a conceptual model for politically modernizing, 1892 times in Finland. And much of it unfolds in a rapid, only slightly concealed 5/4 meter. This is the most fundamental *Kullervo* sound-world:

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK **12**, 0:00—1:00][original: Berglund, *Disc 1*, track 3, 1:35-2:35, fade-out]

This large centerpiece, the third movement, “Kullervo and His Sister,” is a 24-minute composition in itself, and it falls into three broad, unmistakable parts. First, this choral recitation and the meeting of Kullervo with various maidens, the last of which is his sister, whom he finally entices into his sleigh with riches and money. The centerpiece is the love-scene, the seduction itself, suddenly subdued and erotic, two oboes plus murmuring chorus, swelling into orchestra alone in a graphic musical representation of the sexual act—now without words, primitive-Tristanesque, simultaneously enticing and mythically horrifying.

[MUSIC: Burned CD TRACK **13**, 0:00—01:43]

[original: Berglund, *Disc 1*, track 3, 10:11—11:50; fade-out]

Astonishing music! On the other side of which, in this large third movement, we have the denouement—the revelation of the brother-sister relationship followed by two stunning declamatory monologues, that of the sister (before her suicide) and finally, that of Kullervo himself ~~(and his suicide)~~, the concluding “Kullervo’s Lament.”

It is safe to say that music of this elemental coarseness and power had never before been presented to the public—perhaps anywhere. *Kullervo* was a hyper-bold experiment of a recklessly creative young genius that drove into the deepest tensions and aspirations of an emerging Finnish culture in 1892—that plunged into pitched culture wars, issues of self-identity, “imagined community,” and language-legitimacy—all in pursuit of an “otherness” and a local identity that was now to be heard, for the first time, as a primeval “truth” plunging deeper than the “niceties” of any standardized art-music tradition. But for Sibelius this was a cultural “truth” so localized, so idiosyncratically Finnish, that he was ^{apparently} convinced that it could not be exported in so unpolished a fashion to other cultures in his lifetime. And so he withdrew the work.

In the past four decades, though, *Kullervo*, in its very strangeness and in its localized-mythic qualities—precisely the qualities that Sibelius must have been most worried about—*Kullervo* has proved to be more exportable, more seemingly universal than Sibelius ever imagined. We now regard it as indispensable—a treasured part of the Sibelius symphonic legacy now restored to us full-belt, with all of its uncompromised crudities (crudities which, I think, we are now more than pleased that Sibelius never revised out of the work). However locally Finnish it might originally have been, in *Kullervo*, we might all today touch a deep, elemental current of our own selves—a deep dive into the dark and turbulent psyche, touching a state prior to the tidy groomings and carefully legislated controls of the modern world. It’s a privilege to be able, today, to hear *Kullervo*.

END