

Jean Sibelius: Finlandia, Op. 26

The life of Jean Sibelius, who became one of the giant figures in 20th-century music, was rather uneventful. He received a thorough academic training and studied law at the university of Helsingfors. After one year at the university, however, it became clear that he had to dedicate himself to music. He studied first at the Music Academy of Helsingfors and later on in Berlin and Vienna. After returning to his homeland he became Professor of theory and of the Violin at the Academy of Helsingfors and soon established himself as the prominent national composer of Finland. In 1897 a government stipend, providing a regular income for his lifetime, relieved him of the necessity of earning his living and thus he was able to devote himself entirely to composition. He spent the rest of his life in Finland, with the exception of a few short visits to England and the USA. He lived mostly on his estate in Järvenpää (some 40 miles – 65 kilometres – from Helsinki), where he found the solitude and inspiration he required for his creative work amidst the forests and lakes of his beloved country.

The most characteristic feature of the music of Sibelius is that, in spite of not being deliberately modern, it is completely different from any other music. His strong individuality and personal style revealed itself in his very first compositions and it is noteworthy that, unlike most other composers in their earlier works, he never came under the dominant influence of any of the great composers of his younger days. He succeeded in absorbing all foreign influences into his own musical personality, which was firmly rooted in his native soil, gaining constant inspiration from both folk music and the natural beauty of his surroundings. These sources of inspiration account for an elemental, almost pagan, strength characterising all his writings.

The tone-poem *Finlandia* is one of Sibelius' earliest compositions and perhaps the first to bring him international recognition. Written in 1899, at a time when Finland suffered under Russian domination, it appeared to express in such a vivid way the struggle of the Finns against oppression and their yearning for liberty that it soon became the treasured possession of his compatriots and the musical manifestation of Finnish patriotism for the rest of the world.

It is significant that the principal theme is so much like a Finnish folk song that it was at first found hard to believe that it was in fact an original invention of Sibelius. When it first appears, intoned gently by the woodwind after the gloom of the powerful brass passages of the introduction, it conveys the impression of an enchanting landscape emerging from the mist after a storm. But darkness and vigorous conflicts return again building up towards the final climax which

culminates in a last victorious return of this lovely tune – played this time by the brass with the support of the full orchestra – which brings to a rousing conclusion this wonderful musical expression of an oppressed nation's struggles and hopes for freedom and deliverance.

Johannes Brahms: Piano Concerto No 1 in D minor, Op. 15

Allegro maestoso

Adagio

Rondo

The *First Piano Concerto* of Brahms started life in 1854 as a symphony, one of the few compositions he attempted while he was caring for Clara Schumann during Robert's final stay in an asylum. It was never published or even finished, as far as we know. Brahms sketched the work in a two-piano arrangement and so many pianistic passages crept into it that he abandoned it, but used the material in writing the first movement of this piano concerto. (The rewritten slow movement of the symphony became the second movement of the German Requiem.)

The early performances were failures and Brahms continued to revise it until a Mannheim audience gave it the reception it deserved, after a fine performance with Brahms himself at the piano. After so many revisions, it is difficult to find a definitive score, but these days, most performers use a version prepared by the pianist/musicologist Paul Badura-Skoda from Brahms's own arrangement for two pianos, which was rediscovered last century.

The first movement, the most symphonic of the work, is in extended sonata form. The long orchestral tutti is tragic, stormy and sombre and contains most of the thematic material. The piano enters almost unobtrusively, with a gentle, expressive quaver theme and goes on to elaborate the themes in Brahms' classical manner. There is no *bravura* cadenza, but instead a serene solo based on the second theme and full of Brahms's favourite device of setting three beats against two. The solo reappears in the recapitulation, to be followed by a brilliant coda to round off the movement.

In the slow movement Brahms writes a celestial song of comfort in the major mode. Over the opening notes of Joachim's copy of the score, Brahms wrote "benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini" (Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord). This is a subtle reference to Joachim's nickname for Schumann,

'Mynheer Domine', and an expression of affection and gratitude to Schumann.

In the final *Rondo* the clouds of tragedy have vanished altogether and the mood and rhythm suggest the gypsy element that plays such an important part in much of Brahms's later music. The vigorous *rondo* theme is introduced by the piano and the various excursions include a little fugato for the strings, a quasi-cadenza and a short cadenza proper before the final flourish.

Jean Sibelius: Symphony No 1 in E minor, Op. 39

Andante ma non troppo - Allegro Energico

Andante (ma non troppo lento)

Scherzo: Allegro

Finale (Quasi una Fantasia): Andante

On 26 April 1899 Sibelius conducted the first performance of his *First Symphony*. At this point in his career he had already been acclaimed as a composer with such works as the *Karelia Suite* and *Kullervo*. His first symphony was greeted with enthusiasm and recognised as the work of a master.

The music in this symphony, and in particular the orchestration, has been compared to that of Tchaikovsky. Indeed this is understandable: the emotional surges, the dramatic use of the brass instruments and the colourful writing in the woodwind instruments were all influenced by Tchaikovsky's style. But such a comparison can only really be applied to this *First Symphony*. Sibelius was to develop his own unique symphonic style, constantly striving for a compression of the musical material. In doing this he aimed to create unified, organic structures, romantic in tone and gesture but classical in concentration and economy.

The first movement opens with a solo clarinet accompanied by a roll on the timpani. This melancholy introduction is soon replaced by an energetic main theme introduced by the strings. The vibrancy and motivation of this theme continues throughout the movement and reflects the overall feeling of the whole symphony.

The expansive central theme of the second movement is subjected to a broad spectrum of variation. As the music progresses it builds in intensity – at its peak the tempo of the first few bars has been doubled! The peaceful basic mood then returns and predominates towards the end.

Sibelius uses a basic three-part scherzo as his third movement. The main

driving theme of this scherzo is introduced on the timpani. A central slow section provides a direct contrast to the pounding rhythms of the first and third sections which surround it.

In the "finale" a short slow introduction corresponds to the beginning of the symphony. The clarinet theme is taken up by the strings and pronounced with much more intensity. A very fast section follows in which rondo-like elements dominate. Watch out for a sudden halt in the music! As the title suggests the structure in the last movement is free and unconstrained (*Quasi una Fantasia*). Tension-filled clashes and heroic themes dominate the music, which culminates in a powerful coda.

Programme notes not attributed but provided courtesy of Making Music, the UK's membership organisation for leisure-time music, with around 3850 groups representing around 228,000 music makers across the UK.