

The History in This Program

The New York Philharmonic first performed music by Jean Sibelius in 1902, when the 36-year-old composer had just one symphony to his name and was just beginning to be recognized outside his native Finland. It was the start of a relationship with the composer that would deepen over the following decades. Within ten years the Orchestra was performing at least one work by Sibelius practically every season. By 1935 a listener poll conducted by radio announcer and program annotator Lawrence Gilman found that Sibelius was the audience's favorite living composer.

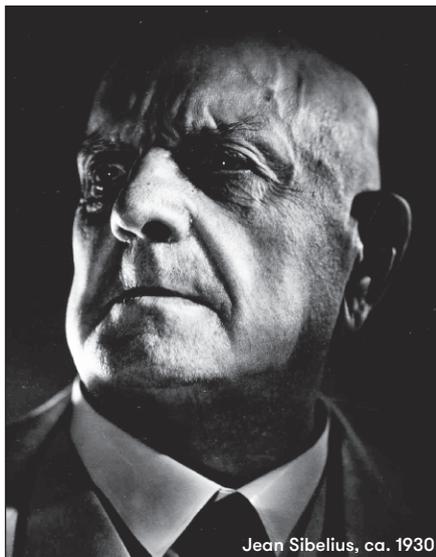
In fact, the Philharmonic did more than just program the composer's works. When an aging Sibelius found himself in dire financial straits during World War II (he had not been composing for years and royalties from his German publisher were blocked during the war), the Philharmonic brainstormed creative ways to show its support. At one point, Charles Triller, President and Chairman, even contributed \$100 to a "cigar fund" for the composer. (For reference, the top ticket price at Carnegie Hall, the Philharmonic's home at the time, was \$4.20, including tax.) Toward the end of the war, the Board of Directors sent Sibelius a then-considerable \$1,000 in aid, disguised as a royalty check so that the proud Finn would accept it. The plan worked. Sibelius relayed his thanks in a telegram to Orchestra Manager Arthur Judson in April of 1945: "Kindly convey to the highly esteemed members of your illustrious society my deeply felt gratitude for the appreciation of my work."

When President Lyndon B. Johnson joined the Finnish government in declaring 1965 "Sibelius Year," in honor of the composer's centennial, the Philharmonic became the first American ensemble to recognize the commemoration. A Young People's Concert that February — led by Leonard Bernstein — was titled "A Tribute to Sibelius" and featured the composer's *Finlandia* and movements from his Violin Concerto and Symphony No. 2. Six delegates from the Finnish Consulate were in attendance, including Laura Enckell, Sibelius's granddaughter and wife of the Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations.

But the greatest celebration was yet to come. Bernstein opened the 1965–66 season with an all-Sibelius program, followed by a complete cycle of the composer's symphonies over the following two seasons that was recorded for release by Columbia Records. For his contributions to the Sibelius legacy, the Finnish government named Bernstein a Commander of the Order of the Lion in 1965.

— The Archives

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Jean Sibelius, ca. 1930

Symphony No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 82

Jean Sibelius

Jean Sibelius drew on the resources of both his own country — Finland — and other, more “musically central” lands during his formative years. He studied composition and violin at the Helsingfors (Helsinki) Conservatory and then received a grant from the Finnish government that enabled him to take classes in counterpoint and fugue in Berlin. From there he continued to Vienna for further study of composition.

He then turned his sights back toward his native Finland and, in the early 1890s, began writing works on Finnish folk legends. These quickly established him as the most important of his nation’s composers, a reputation that was absolutely clinched with the premiere of his stirring patriotic composition *Finlandia* in 1900.

A year earlier he had unveiled the first of his seven symphonies. These would occupy him practically to the conclusion of his productive career, which ended in 1927. At the age of 62 he basically retired, and, despite persistent and hopeful rumors, completed no more compositions in the three decades that remained to him.

The Finnish government commissioned Sibelius’s Fifth Symphony to mark the composer’s 50th birthday in 1915. The resulting symphony was something of a surprise to Sibelius watchers. His Fourth Symphony had been a rather desolate piece, redolent of isolation, even in the context of an oeuvre that was regularly described as reflecting the iciness of its Nordic origins. Then again, Sibelius would declare, “Each of my symphonies has its own style. I have to work a lot to achieve that” — or, on another occasion, that each of his symphonies represented “a credo at varying stages in life.”

Sibelius’s Fifth Symphony occupied the composer for seven years, since he probably

began sketching it as early as 1912 and revised it considerably following the provisional premiere, which he conducted in Helsinki on his 50th birthday. A second version was unveiled in 1916, and then, after still more work, the Fifth Symphony reached its final form in 1919.

External difficulties may have accounted for some of the slow going. Finland had been a Grand Duchy of Russia since 1809, when Russia wrested the country from Sweden. But Finnish nationalism had been growing — fueled publicly by Sibelius’s music — and in 1917 the nation achieved its independence, at which point internal political strife led to an immediate civil war. In a sense, this was only a subplot to the larger political drama of World War I, during which Sibelius, being cut off

IN SHORT

Born: December 8, 1865, in Tavastehus (Hämeenlinna), Finland

Died: September 20, 1957, in Järvenpää, Finland

Work composed: 1912–15, revised 1915–16 and again through autumn 1919

World premiere: December 8, 1915, in Helsinki, with the composer conducting the Helsinki Municipal Orchestra. In its first major revision, the work was introduced on December 14, 1916, by Sibelius and the same orchestra, and on October 21, 1921, the same performers unveiled the work in its final revised version, which is the standard version heard today.

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 10, 1921, Josef Stransky, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: November 5, 2013, Esa-Pekka Salonen, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 31 minutes

from his German publishers, received no royalties and had a hard time getting by.

Then, too, he was juggling several major projects at once, at least in his mind. In 1918 he wrote in a letter:

My new works, partly sketched and planned. The Fifth Symphony in a new form — practically composed anew — I work daily ... The whole — if I may say so —

a spirited intensification to the end (climax). Triumphal.

Sibelius goes on to tell his correspondent that two of the other pieces currently in his thoughts are his Sixth and Seventh Symphonies. These final three Sibelius symphonies exhibit strikingly distinct characters, but listeners would not be amiss to consider them a sort of trilogy, summing up the com-

Listen for ... the Tolling of Bells

At two points in the *Andante mosso* movement of Sibelius's Symphony No. 5, melodies are subtly underscored by a broadly swinging bass line — played in octaves by the bass section, *divisi* — that might suggest the tolling of bells:

Andante mosso, quasi allegretto.

Basses

mp *dim.* *p*

poco a poco stretto

That bell-like motif becomes a major element in the texture of the finale, where it has been described as the movement's heartbeat. Near the opening, amidst a flurry of spiky string writing, the horns peel out the tolling figure in a fragmentary form:

Allegro molto.

1, 2

Horns

poco f e deciso

3, 4

poco f e deciso

In the work's final pages, this motif is taken up by the trumpets, supported from time to time by other wind instruments, to lead to the symphony's ecstatic conclusion. This is a fine example of a Sibelius thumbprint: introducing melodic material almost grudgingly and through allusion, such that we may understand the foreshadowing of themes only in retrospect.

poser's grappling with symphonic writing.

The Fifth opens in an atmosphere of mysterious beauty. One might imagine time-lapse photography of wildflowers unfolding in a vast landscape, or at least think of the composer's notation in a notebook in late 1914:

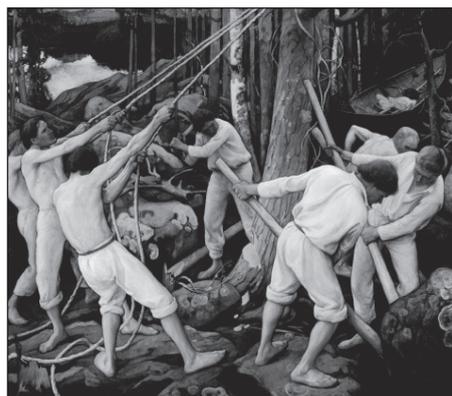
I begin to see dimly the mountain I shall ascend. ... God opens His door for a moment and His orchestra plays the Fifth Symphony.

The *Andante mosso* movement is a placid interlude marked by numerous melodies set to a similar rhythm. All manner of brilliant writing fills the finale, such that by the time this remarkable work reaches its conclusion in six widely separated and powerful chords — please don't clap till they're over! — one can only agree with the composer's description of it as "triumphal."

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings.

Sibelius's Finland

Finland was undergoing its share of turmoil at the turn of the 20th century, straining with nationalistic fervor against the yoke of its Russian occupiers. In the late 1800s Finns seemed ready to burst with pent-up excitement over homegrown culture, which extended to the collecting of traditional music and dance, a fascination with ancient Finnish legends, and a resurgence in the use of the Finnish language itself.



Sibelius was greatly caught up with the artists and writers and musicians who were plying their trades in support of an independent Finland, and he turned out a hearty diet of pro-Finnish patriotic and propagandistic compositions. A few of his successes from this nationalistic period — the tone poems *The Swan of Tuonela*, *Lemminkäinen's Return*, and *Finlandia* among them — began to earn him a reputation even beyond Finnish borders, making him the first Finnish composer to gain truly international acclaim.

Pioneers in Karelia, by Eero Jämfelt, 1900, one of the artists closely associated with depictions of Finnish nationalism