

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D minor, Op. 47

Jean Sibelius

Asked to use the words “Sibelius” and “violin” together in a sentence, most music lovers would automatically add the word “concerto” to the mix. It’s inevitable, really: Jean Sibelius’s D-minor Violin Concerto towers as an icy summit in the instrument’s literature. But Sibelius and the violin are connected in other ways, too. He aspired to become a violin virtuoso himself but unfortunately fixed on that goal too late for it to be feasible. When he embarked on violin lessons he was 14 years old. By that age many virtuosos-in-training are already seasoned players, and the provincial instruction available to Sibelius, combined with his tendency toward stage fright, limited his progress. Still, he became accomplished enough to play in the Vienna Conservatory’s orchestra when he was a student there, in 1890–91, and he even auditioned (unsuccessfully) for a chair in the Vienna Philharmonic.

Sibelius enriched his instrument’s repertoire by quite a few works apart from the concerto. He worked on a second violin concerto in 1915 but abandoned it far from completion, recycling his sketches into his Sixth Symphony. He also composed numerous works for violin and piano, including a Sonata (1889) and a Sonatina (Op. 80, 1915), as well as many items grouped into collections of short movements. Shortly before he gave up composing, around 1927, Sibelius engaged one last time with the instrument, although the Suite for Violin and Orchestra he projected would remain a fragmented draft.

None of these works rivals the Violin Concerto in combining Sibelius’s unique musical language with the capabilities of the solo instrument. This, in effect, was the central challenge confronting the composer. Already, in such works as his first two symphonies and his Lemminkäinen tone poems, he had

defined his dark, sober sound, and these were not characteristics that would easily be melded with the more extroverted, even flashy tradition that surrounded most violin concertos of the 19th century. Still, a concerto needed to have a certain degree of flashiness or else a soloist could hardly be expected to perform it. Sibelius solved this problem by creating what some historians have viewed as “a deepening of the tradition.” The musicologist James Hepokoski finds in this work

a virtuoso concerto simultaneously affirmed and transcended by a thoroughgoing seriousness of purpose and “surplus” density of compositional pondering.

The section of a traditional concerto most at odds with Sibelius’s predilection for profundity would be the first-movement cadenza, in which soloists are given the

IN SHORT

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

Died: September 20, 1957, in Järvenpää, Finland

Work composed: September 1902 to early 1904; revised 1905

World premiere: February 8, 1904, in Helsinki, by the Helsingfors Philharmonic with the composer conducting, Victor Nováček, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 30, 1906, Wassily Sofonoff, conductor, Maud Powell, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: March 19, 2016, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Leonidas Kavakos, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 32 minutes

greatest opportunities to demonstrate their technical prowess. Sibelius meets the challenge head-on: he provides a solo cadenza but instead of presenting it as a sort of pendant to the proceedings he gives it immense structural importance, moving it to the middle of the movement and essentially making it fill the role of a development section. (A second cadenza, playing a more traditional function, originally stood at the end of the movement, but Sibelius eliminated it when he tightened the concerto in his 1905 revision.) Also non-traditional is the lack of real dialogue in this concerto, the sort of back-and-forth conversation between

soloist and orchestra typical in the concertos of, say, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and Brahms.

The vast breadth of the opening movement is mirrored in the still beauty of the slow movement, melancholy in a way that perhaps recalls Tchaikovsky. Although this concerto is not a prime example of Sibelius's occasional penchant for folk inspiration, the finale does seem to be a dance of some sort.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings, in addition to the solo violin.

Views and Reviews

Donald Francis Tovey's program note on the Sibelius Violin Concerto — originally penned for the Reid Orchestra in Edinburgh sometime after Tovey's founding of that organization in 1917, and still available as part of his *Essays in Musical Analysis* — includes these observations:

In the easier and looser concerto forms invented by Mendelssohn and Schumann I have not met with a more original, a more masterly, and a more exhilarating work than the Sibelius Violin Concerto. As with all Sibelius's more important works, its outlines are huge and simple; and if a timely glance at an atlas had not reminded me that Finland is mostly flat and water-logged with lakes, I should doubtless have said that "his forms are hewn out of the rocks of his native and Nordic mountains." The composer to whose style the word "lapidary" (*lapidarisch*) was first applied by the orthodoxy of the [eighteen] 'nineties is Bruckner; and if the best work of Sibelius suggests anything else in music, it suggests a Bruckner gifted with an easy mastery and the spirit of a Polar explorer. ... The real problems of musical form are always, in the last resort, problems of movement; and Sibelius has his own special sense of movement, which delivers him from the need of Bruckner's desperate and dangerous gesture of "I pause for a reply." It gives him complete command of the arts of rousing expectation and of slow gradation to a climax.

Sibelius, with violin, in an undated photo

