

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 43

Jean Sibelius

Thanks to benefactions arranged by Axel Carpelan, a Finnish man-about-the-arts and the eventual dedicatee of this work, Jean Sibelius and his family were able to undertake a trip to Italy from February to April 1901. So it was that much of the Second Symphony was sketched in the Italian cities of Florence and, especially, Rapallo, where Sibelius rented a composing studio apart from the home in which his family was lodging.

Aspects of the piece had already begun to form in his mind almost two years earlier, although at that point Sibelius seems to have assumed that his sketches would end up in various separate compositions rather than in a single unified symphony. Even in Rapallo he was focused on writing a tone poem. He reported that on February 11, 1901, he entertained a fantasy that the villa in which his studio was located was the fanciful palace of Don Juan and that he himself was the amorous, amoral protagonist of that legend. (The topic was fresh in his mind since he had recently attended a performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in Berlin, on the way to Italy.) He jotted in his diary the thoughts that accosted him at midnight:

Don Juan. I was sitting in the dark in my castle when a stranger entered. I asked who he could be again and again — but there was no answer. I tried to make him laugh but he remained silent. At last the stranger began to sing — then Don Juan knew who it was. It was death.

His diary then records the notes that stand as the principal theme of the second movement of the Second Symphony.

As the work evolved, Sibelius seems to have sacrificed the Don Juan idea in favor of another, very different concept: a series of

four tone poems based on characters from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. But once Sibelius returned to Finland that June, he began to recognize that what was forming out of his sketches was instead a full-fledged symphony — one that would end up exhibiting an extraordinary degree of unity among its sections. With his goal now clarified, Sibelius worked assiduously through the summer and fall and reached a provisional completion of his symphony in November 1901. Then he had second thoughts, revised the piece profoundly, and definitively concluded the Second Symphony in January 1902.

The work's premiere, two months later, marked a signal success, as did three sold-out performances during the ensuing week. The conductor Robert Kajanus, who would become a distinguished interpreter of Sibelius's works, was in attendance, and he insisted that the Helsinki audiences had understood

IN SHORT

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

Died: September 20, 1957, in Järvenpää

Work composed: 1901–02, although relevant sketches date back to as early as 1899; dedicated to Baron Axel Carpelan

World premiere: March 8, 1902, in Helsinki, Finland, with the composer conducting the Helsinki Philharmonic

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 30, 1914, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928)

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: May 14, 2016, John Storgårds, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 45 minutes

the new symphony to be an overt expression of the political conflict then reigning over Finland. He wrote:

The *Andante* strikes one as the most broken-hearted protest against all the injustice that threatens at the present time to deprive the sun of its light and our flowers of their scent. ... The *Finale* develops toward a triumphant conclusion intended to rouse in the listener a picture of lighter and confident prospects for the future.

Sibelius objected to this interpretation, preferring that no programmatic implications be attached to this work. Nonetheless, this symphony does seem to express something specific to the Finnish imagination. The composer Sulho Ranta (1901–60) spoke on behalf of his fellow Finns when he declared,

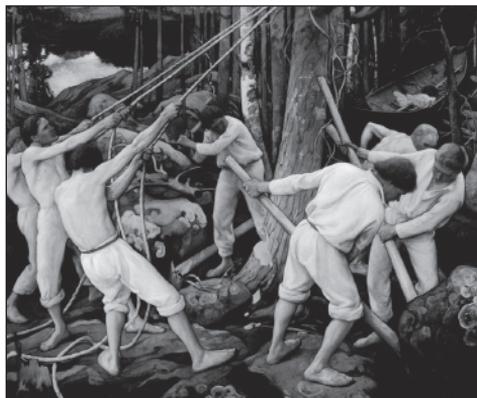
“There is something about this music — at least for us — that leads us to ecstasy; almost like a shaman with his magic drum.”

Some commentators have underscored the piece’s affinity with the symphonies of Brahms (particularly his Second, also in D major), while others find that the *Finale* evokes something of Tchaikovsky. There’s truth in all of this, but in the end, Sibelius marches to a different drummer. Stravinsky once heard Sibelius’s Second Symphony in the company of his teacher, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and reported that the latter offered a solitary comment after the performance: “Well, I suppose that’s possible, too.”

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, 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 Järnefelt, 1900, one of the artists closely associated with depictions of Finnish nationalism