

Symphony No. 1 in E minor, Op. 39

Jean Sibelius

The seven full-scale symphonies composed by Jean Sibelius between 1899 and 1924 stake his place as one of the most imposing symphonists of the 20th century. Even during Sibelius's lifetime, the music historian Cecil Gray had no compunction about declaring that Sibelius was "the greatest master of the symphony since the death of Beethoven."

Such a statement is inevitably a reflection of taste rather than of aesthetic certainty, but it probably raised few eyebrows in the 1930s, when Gray made his pronouncement. Sibelius was by then revered as the pre-eminent living exponent of the symphony in the grand tradition, carrying forward a heritage that was becoming increasingly marginalized among composers. At that moment many of the world's leading musical citizens were hanging onto Sibelius's every report of progress on his Eighth Symphony, which he had begun in 1928 and which he declared to be almost complete in 1933. Hope waned as the decade progressed and it became increasingly apparent that his creative days were over. Apart from two short pieces for men's chorus and some revisions of earlier pieces, Sibelius composed not a single work after 1931 — which is to say in the last 26 years of his life. As musical fashions changed in the 1930s and ensuing decades, Sibelius's reputation plummeted as critics increasingly championed styles less clearly connected to the 19th-century mainstream, whether the liberated tonality of Schoenberg or the neoclassicism of Stravinsky and his colleagues in France. By the 1980s and '90s, interest in Sibelius re-emerged, buoyed in part by the emergence of an extraordinary generation of Finnish musicians devoted to championing the music of the man justly revered as the Patriarch of Finnish Music.

Sibelius was 33 years old when his First Symphony was unveiled. By that time he had completed musical training in Helsinki, Berlin, and Vienna; he had immersed himself in the folklore of his native country; and he had absorbed influences from leading composers of various nations, forging them into a distinctive voice. He had written quite a lot of orchestral music, including such repertoire staples as the tone poems *En Saga*, the *Karelia* Suite, and the *Lemminkäinen* Suite (which includes *The Swan of Tuonela* and *Lemminkäinen's Homecoming*).

Notwithstanding previous orchestral achievements, even very successful ones, it is a signal moment when a composer unleashes his first symphony into the world. By the closing decades of the 19th century, writing a symphony had become something of a political statement, an affirmation of the symphonic tradition reaching from the time of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven to the

In Short

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

Died: September 20, 1957, in Järvenpää

Work composed: April 1898 to early 1899; revised 1900

World premiere: April 26, 1899, in Helsinki, Finland, with the composer conducting the Helsinki Philharmonic Society; in its revised version, July 1, 1900, with Robert Kajanus conducting the same orchestra, also in Helsinki

New York Philharmonic premiere: December 4, 1930, Leopold Stokowski, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: November 17, 2009, Xian Zhang, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 39 minutes

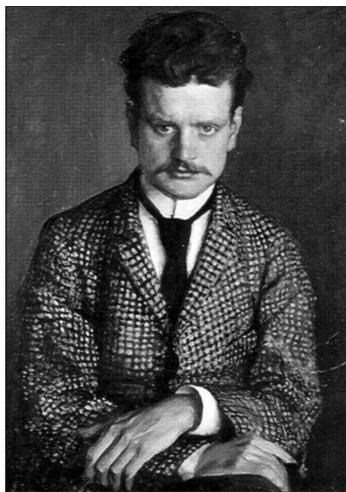
era of Brahms, Bruckner, and Tchaikovsky. However, that tradition was being increasingly challenged by the rivalries of the Liszt-Wagner camp, who were not much given to symphonies — at least not ones that adhered to the time-honored forms. Through his symphonic poems Sibelius had shown considerable sympathy for Lisztian ideals, but he found that the mainstream symphonic tradition also offered opportunities for his expression.

In Sibelius's First Symphony a listener may be fleetingly reminded of such German contemporaries as Richard Strauss, but the most striking point of contact would seem to be with the late-Romantic Russian composers, particularly Tchaikovsky. Finland was under Russian political dominance at the time, and in terms of musical culture Sibelius's Helsinki was practically joined at the

hip to St. Petersburg, a mere 200-mile train ride to the east. Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony made a powerful impression on Sibelius when it was played in Helsinki in 1894 and again in 1897, and wags have occasionally referred to Sibelius's First Symphony as Tchaikovsky's Seventh. In truth, influence co-exists here with unquestionable originality, and for every Tchaikovskian hallmark one finds a readily identifiable Sibelian one that points forward to the distinct language of this unique master.

Instrumentation: two flutes (both doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, bass drum, cymbals, harp, and strings.

Sources and Inspirations



Although Sibelius was somewhat under the thrall of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 when he wrote his Symphony No. 1, he also seems to have been inspired by another famous predecessor, and one of the most astonishing first symphonies in the history of music: Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. On March 2, 1898, Sibelius (traveling in Berlin) noted in his sketchbook that he had been deeply moved by a performance of the Berlioz piece. "O santa inspirazione! O santa dea!" he wrote, and within two months his own First Symphony began to take shape. At one point in his sketchbook the notation "Berlioz?" is jotted above some ideas for his symphony's *Finale* — the fact that Sibelius ended up attaching the words "quasi una fantasia" to that very *Finale* further bolsters the idea that these two "fantastic" works shared some kinship, at least in Sibelius's mind.

Sibelius, in an 1892 portrait by his brother-in-law Eero Järnefelt