Notes on the Program
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Concerto for Violin 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: 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 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. Sibelius would complete his final composition in 1927 and in his last three decades limited his musical creativity to tinkering with extant pieces and making stabs at works that would never come to fruition. Shortly before he gave up composing, Sibelius was engaged one last time with the violin, although the Suite for Violin and Orchestra he projected remained 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. Sibelius was not natively drawn toward composing concertos at all, and this would prove to be the only one, for any instrument, that he would see through to completion. Still, a concerto needed to have a certain degree

In Short

Born: December 8, 1865, in Tavastehus (Hämeenlinna), Finland
Died: September 20, 1957, in Järvenpää
Work composed: September 1902 through the beginning of 1904; today, it is nearly always presented in the revision Sibelius effected in 1905.
World premiere: February 8, 1904, in Helsinki, with the composer conducting the Helsingfors Philharmonic, Victor Novákček, soloist
New York Philharmonic premiere: November 30, 1906, Wassily Safonoff, conductor, Maud Powell, soloist; this marked the US Premiere
Estimated duration: ca. 32 minutes
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 greatest opportunities to demonstrate their technical prowess. The composer 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 that one is accustomed to hearing 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.

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**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 — 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.