

Masterworks Concert 1 – September 25 & 26, 2017

Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47

Jean Sibelius
1865-1957

When Sweden relinquished Finland to the Russian Empire in 1809, it became an autonomous duchy with significant control over its own affairs. But in 1870 Tsar Alexander II gradually began whittling away the Finns' privileges and autonomy. While Swedish had continued to be the language of the educated and of the middle class, Russian repression aroused strong nationalist feelings and initiated a revival of the Finnish language. Jean Sibelius was born into this nationalistic environment and in 1876 enrolled in the first grammar school to teach in the Finnish language.

Sibelius was by no means a child prodigy. He began playing piano at nine, didn't like it and took up the violin at 14. Although he also started composing at ten, Sibelius's ambition was to become a concert violinist and throughout his adult life regretted not following his dream. Lifelong addiction to alcohol produced a persistent tremor in his hands that precluded a concert career.

Sibelius's first success as a composer came in 1892 with a nationalistic symphonic poem/cantata titled *Kullervo*, Op. 7. The work met with great praise but was never again performed in his lifetime. During the next six years he composed music for numerous nationalistic pageants, symphonic poems and vocal works, mostly based on the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*. In appreciation and in order to enable him to compose undisturbed, the Finnish governing council gave Sibelius a pension for life in 1897. For the next 28 years he composed the symphonies and other orchestral works that made him famous. In 1926, at the age of 60, he suddenly ceased composing for reasons never disclosed – although probably from the combined ravages of alcoholism and bipolar disorder. His pen remained silent until his death, 31 years later.

Sibelius wrote the Violin Concerto as a testimony to his failed ambition to become a violinist, pouring into it every known technical difficulty and then some. Composed on a commission in 1903, its Helsinki premiere received mixed reviews and Sibelius withdrew it for revision. Violinist Karl Halir, under the baton of Richard Strauss, premiered the thoroughly revised version in 1905 in Berlin. Sibelius forbade the performance of the first version, which was eventually released by the composer's family in 1989, when it was finally recorded.

The First movement is by far the weightiest. It explores Sibelius's particular take on sonata form with the themes evolving from one another without a true development section. The soloist opens the Concerto with a stunning theme, which is continually broken up into its motivic elements – particularly the opening three notes – and transformed throughout the movement. The orchestra introduces a second theme, which Sibelius subsequently uses as a refrain. Rather than constructing the movement as a continual dialogue between soloist and orchestra in the standard concerto style, Sibelius intersperses the movement with several cadenza-like passages, beginning with the opening. The principal cadenza at the end of the movement is based mainly on the opening theme and requires spectacular technical virtuosity.

The second movement has always been considered the weakest and has been occasionally called sentimental, self-indulgent salon music. It is unusual in the amount of music given to the violin in its lowest register and – as much as Sibelius himself would have cringed to hear it – resembles closely the expansive emotive utterings of Tchaikovsky.

Predictably, the final movement is technically thrilling and exceptionally challenging. It focuses on two themes, the first introduced by the soloist accompanied only by an insistent pounding ostinato in the timpani and the basses. Its second theme has a lumbering rhythm, once described as “A Polonaise for polar bears.” Towards the end the violin repeats the first theme in eerie harmonics.

Symphony No. 9 in E minor, Op. 95
“From the New World”

Antonín Dvořák
1841-1904

Antonín Dvořák’s sojourn in the United States from 1892 to 1895 came about through the efforts of Mrs. Jeanette B. Thurber. A dedicated and idealistic proponent of an American national musical style, she underwrote and administered the first American music conservatory, the National Conservatory of Music in New York. Because of Dvořák’s popularity throughout Europe, he was Thurber’s first choice for a director. The fact that he spoke no English was of little consequence since the language of musical discourse was German. He, in turn, was probably lured to the big city so far from home by both a large salary and convictions regarding musical nationalism that paralleled Mrs. Thurber’s own.

Thirty years before his arrival in New York, Dvořák had read Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Song of Hiawatha* in a Czech translation and was eager to learn more about the Native American and African-American music, which he believed should be the basis of the American style of composition. He also shared with Mrs. Thurber the conviction that the National Conservatory should admit Negro students. One of them, Henry Burleigh, who became an important African-American composer in his own right, is credited with exposing his teacher to African-American spirituals.

While his knowledge of authentic Native American music is questionable – his exposure came through samples transcribed for him by American friends and through Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show – he became familiar with African-American spirituals through Burleigh, as well as indirectly via the songs of Stephen Foster. He incorporated both of these styles into the Symphony No. 9, composed while he was in New York.

Just as Dvořák never quoted Bohemian folk music directly in his own nationalistic music, he did not use American themes in their entirety. Rather, with his unsurpassed gift for melody, he incorporated characteristic motives into his own themes. Nevertheless, any listener with half an ear can discern “Massa Dear” (also known as “Goin’ Home”) in the famous English horn solo in the second movement. We can deduce the importance of these musical motives from the fact that they appear as reminiscences in more than one movement, especially in the Finale. The symphony, however, is hardly an American pastiche; the second motive in the Largo movement is a phrase of wrenching musical longing that many listeners interpret as the composer’s nostalgia for his native Bohemia. The New York music critic and Dvořák’s friend, Henry Krehbiel, claimed that the movement was inspired by incidents from *The Song of Hiawatha*. Which incidents, however, have never been definitively determined. Krehbiel posited the scene in which Hiawatha woos Minnehaha, while others have suggested

Minnehaha's funeral. Incidentally, Dvořák had also intended to compose an opera on *Hiawatha*, which never left the drawing board.

The third movement as well, in its rhythmic thumping, the pentatonic scale and the orchestration dominated by winds and percussion, is meant to portray an Indian ceremonial dance described in Longfellow's poem. Dvořák's symphonic use of what he believed to be an authentic Native American musical idiom may have reflected his initial ideas for the opera.

One of the most important features of the Symphony is its thematic coherence. Whatever the origin of the melodies, they all have a modular characteristic in that they can be mixed and matched in many different ways. In the last movement, Dvořák brings nearly all of the Symphony's themes together, sometimes as one long continuous melody, sometimes in contrapuntal relationship to each other.

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