

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 43
Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

Allegretto
Tempo andante ma rubato
Vivacissimo
Finale: Allegro Moderato

By 1892, when he wrote *En Saga*, Johan Sibelius had studied Law in Helsinki, forming a long friendship with Busoni, further studied music in Vienna and Berlin, had returned to Finland as its premier composer and in a popularly *façonable* manner adopted Jean, as his first name. In the years between the two world wars, Britain and the United States emerged as champions of his music. In Britain he was the most admired living composer after Elgar's death in 1934 and Vaughan-Williams dedicated his 5th symphony to him "without permission". Yet it is strange that by this time, Sibelius had stopped writing altogether. His eighth symphony, which he wrote and destroyed in 1929 was his last work, a good twenty-eight years before he died. In fact, though it is not immediately apparent, he was an exact contemporary of Arnold Schoenberg, who also lived through the cataclysmic seventy-five years spanning 1875 and 1950. But there the parallel ends.

There is a distinct and personal stamp that pervades the music of Sibelius and there is a varied enough palette in the cycle of seven symphonies that remain to us, that distinguishes him as a master. He did not push chromatic harmony to the limits of Mahler, or his Danish contemporary Nielson. Nor did he seek to expand the orchestral dimension with added instruments or vocal parts. Yes, his music seems simpler than that of his contemporaries, but as Dr. Tovey points out, "the simplicity in Sibelius is not a simplification, and his art is neither revolutionary nor negative". The result is a deft mastery of a musical mold that is delivered to him by his position in history. Seemingly classical by review of his musical forms the music itself is richly dramatic and romantic. In fact, despite the lack of "theatrics" he manages to conceive large works of considerable dimension and weight, comparable to what Wagner managed at the height of his 'all encompassing' dramas, and what to some extent eluded Liszt altogether.

The Second Symphony, 1901, comes from a musical history that had already seen *Finlandia*, *Karelia Suite*, *Lemminkainen* and *the legends of Kalevala* and a fervently nationalistic mood that was mirrored in the nations of the region at the time. This symphony is the most widely favored by audiences, precisely because of the resonating themes, lush sounds and the exalting jubilation of the climaxes that marks this particular brand of nationalism.

“I found the Second Symphony of Sibelius vulgar, self-indulgent, and provincial beyond all description”. (Virgil Thomson, *New York Herald Tribune*, October 11, 1940). Thomson, writing a decade after Sibelius had stopped, was entirely wrong about this – and even if he weren’t, some of the world’s best beloved music has been, quite justly, both provincial and self-indulgent. How else do you stir a nation to patriotic heights? No one ‘worth their salt’ would deny the triumphal banner-waving, heart-pulling finale, nor should they want to.