

## **Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)**

### **Symphony No. 1 in E minor**

*"The first symphony is the energetic music of a young man. The young Sibelius was no wimp; the music contains the whole wildness and rage of the man."*

**Osmo Vänskä, conductor 1998**

The sentiment in the quotation above is the modern scholastic interpretation of Sibelius' First symphony devoid of all the Nationalism, Politics and Territorial jargon that occupied descriptions of his music until very recently. It is true that this piece written in 1899 and revised completely in 1900 comes at a time of political upheaval. Russia was having problems with what it considered to be the Duchy of Finland. The Finnish people were having problems with any Russian view suggesting that they had any control over Finnish autonomy.

Though Sibelius wrote a song cycle referring to that struggle, and it coincided with this Symphony in E minor – the symphony is more a declaration of self. It is a composer essaying on his compositional style – one which was at the same time uniquely Sibelius, uniquely Finnish – and yet borrowed from Tchaikovsky, Brahms and even Wagner.

Writing the piece in Berlin, it is unlikely that the picturesque wording that has accompanied the movements actually had anything to do with the music. So we may discount any reference to the four descriptions that are contained in his sketch book but never come to any fruition.– "A Cold, Cold wind is Blowing from the Sea" - "The Pine of the North dreams of the Palm of the South" - "A Winter's Tale" - "Jorma's Heaven". However, there are references to a theme called "Berlioz" which does make its way into the symphony.

The brooding nature of Sibelius' music is not dissimilar to the brooding nature of the man. Even in his own words, he tends to have a melodramatic aura, which on occasion he laughs off as having been ridiculous. During this time, he suffered from a terrible blow in the death of his 1 year old daughter Kirsti and his wife Aino became ill with grief, doubling the burden. There is an intense feeling of desolation in the clarinet solo that opens the piece. However, not unlike the grand music of Mahler, tremendous sorrow and painful grief give way to tremendous power and healing triumph.

This symphony is a fine, fond and self-confident farewell to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and paves the way for what is to come. Music begins to be less concerned with formality and more concerned with human emotion. By the time the Great War leaves Europe reeling from death, emotion and its raw portrayal is at a premium in all art forms. This work represents an ushering into that new era as eloquently stated by Ferdinand Pfohl in the *Hamburger Nachrichten*.

*"... a work full of unrestrained strength, full of passionate vivacity and astonishing audacity is – to state the matter plainly – a remarkable work, one that steps out on new paths, or rather rushes forward like an intoxicated god."*