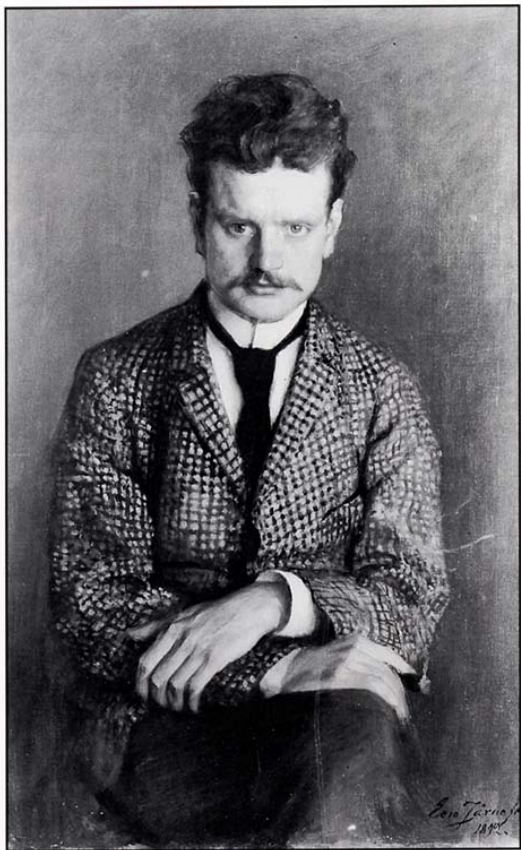


NEW GEMS

First publications of works by Jean Sibelius



There are few great composers whose total oeuvre is as little known as that of Sibelius. Running to over 500 items, his works encompass a wide range of music which astonishes by its very breadth, its technical mastery, vitality and invention. The fact that steps are now being taken to publish some of Jean Sibelius's early works is of utmost importance – also because they deserve a place in the basic romantic repertoire.

Jean Sibelius painted by Eero Järnefelt 1892
(Courtesy National Museum of Finland)

During the past few years the image of Sibelius has undergone a radical change, now that the music world has become aware that he was also a not inconsiderable composer of music for the stage and that the early versions of some of his works have appeared on the concert scene again. Most of all the position of Sibelius as a composer has been clarified and reinforced by the discovery of his youthful output.

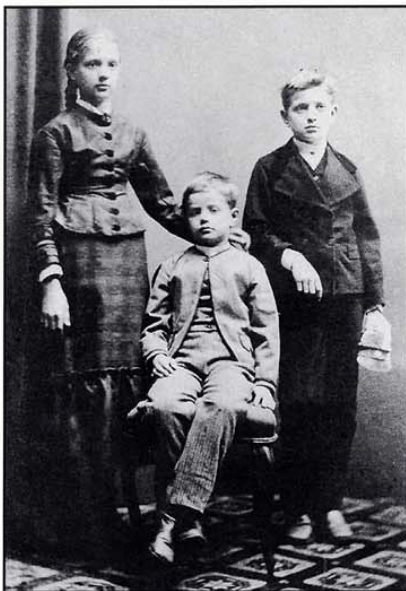
During his lifetime Sibelius kept the compositions and sketches written as a schoolboy and student well hidden from the public eye, since he feared they would tarnish his reputation. Admittedly he sometimes drew on them as a source of thematic invention (just as Beethoven exploited the material of his years in Bonn even as a mature composer) and resorted to publishing them at times when no other works were forthcoming or he found himself hard pressed for money.

All in all the one hundred or more works or exercises composed between 1880 and 1891 and donated by the Sibelius family to the Helsinki University Library in 1982 reveal Sibelius in a new light: as a thoroughly competent composer well versed in the Classical-Romantic tradition of Central Europe with a fine command of the conventional forms, genres, scorings and techniques. The reception of Sibelius's music in, say, the German-speaking area would have been considerably warmer had the influential music circles been even aware that such works existed.

The bulk of the material dating from Sibelius's early chamber music period consists of smallish works for various solo instruments or duos. But it also includes some fifteen large-scale works: four piano trios, four string quartets, four sonatas or suites for violin and piano, a piano quintet, a piano quartet and a string trio. The fact that steps are now being taken to publish these works is of the utmost importance, not only to Sibelius's reputation but also because the best among them well deserve a place in the basic romantic repertoire.

As a young man, Sibelius always dreamt of becoming a violinist, but his dream never really came true. For not only did he take up the violin until it was too late, he also suffered from stage fright. During his years as a student in Helsinki (1885-89) he did, however, appear as the soloist in

some romantic pieces (Bériot, *Vieuxtemps*) and even in the *Mendelssohn concerto*. It is no wonder, therefore, that the shadow of the Mendelssohn concerto seems to hover over the four-movement *Suite in E major* for violin and piano (1888). The solo cadenza at the end of the first movement in turn speaks more of the influence of Bach writing for the solo violin. The slow waltz (*valse lente*) in the third movement is a genre typical of the late Romantic era. The virtuoso suite ends with a polonaise in the manner of Wieniawski. As a whole the work is not therefore particularly Sibelian but this makes it none the less charming. There are no records of whether the suite was ever performed before 1994.



Sibelius with his sister Linda and younger brother Christian

(Courtesy Sibelius Museum, Turku)

The *Violin Sonata in F major* (1889) would have nothing to fear on even the most demanding concert programme, being a large sonata of generous proportions brimming with melody and brilliance and abounding in musical invention. Sibelius writes with equal skill and polish for the violin and piano alike, resulting in dialogue in the true chamber music spirit. The work is characterised by a synthesis of motif and melodic thinking, of the sustained attention to motif and clarity of form familiar from German music and the penchant for melody and atmosphere associated with Finland

and Scandinavia. Sibelius's budding modality and his tendency to generate new melodies in the spirit of the folk song are already in evidence here. Identifying the composer would be difficult if one did not know: the idiom ranges from Mendelssohn-like romanticism to the soundscape of Grieg and early Debussy while never being robbed of its own distinctive sound.

The *Canon* for violin and cello in the form of a minuet also written in 1889 is in the nature of an exercise in counterpoint while nevertheless deserving performance in its own right. The *Duo* for violin and viola (1891-92) is a melodically charming piece in melancholy Finnish mood and perfect for, say, teaching purposes.

With a considerable corpus of conventional chamber music behind him, Sibelius suddenly changed course: during the years he spent studying in Berlin and Vienna (1889-91) he became an 'orchestral man'. This complete about-turn was unexpectedly successful. Although he had never really heard much orchestral music, the few lessons he took with Karl Goldmark coupled with the inspiration provided by the performances he heard in Berlin and Vienna of Beethoven and Bruckner led him to produce his first orchestral scores in only a short space of time. The ease with which he took up this new medium and the assurance with which he made his orchestral debut in his *Overture in E major* and *Scène de ballet* (1891) are indeed astonishing.

The *Overture* is not yet altogether original: the sonata form and handling of the orchestra indicate that at least Bruckner and Wagner were present at their conception. It does nevertheless contain much that is intrinsically Sibelius and that already points ahead to *Kullervo* and *Lemminkäinen*, in the direction of symphonic technique. The main theme observes the melodic and rhythmic approach of the Finnish roundelay, whereas the rune-like second theme gives the work a hint of the gloomy acceptance of fate later to surface in *Kullervo*.

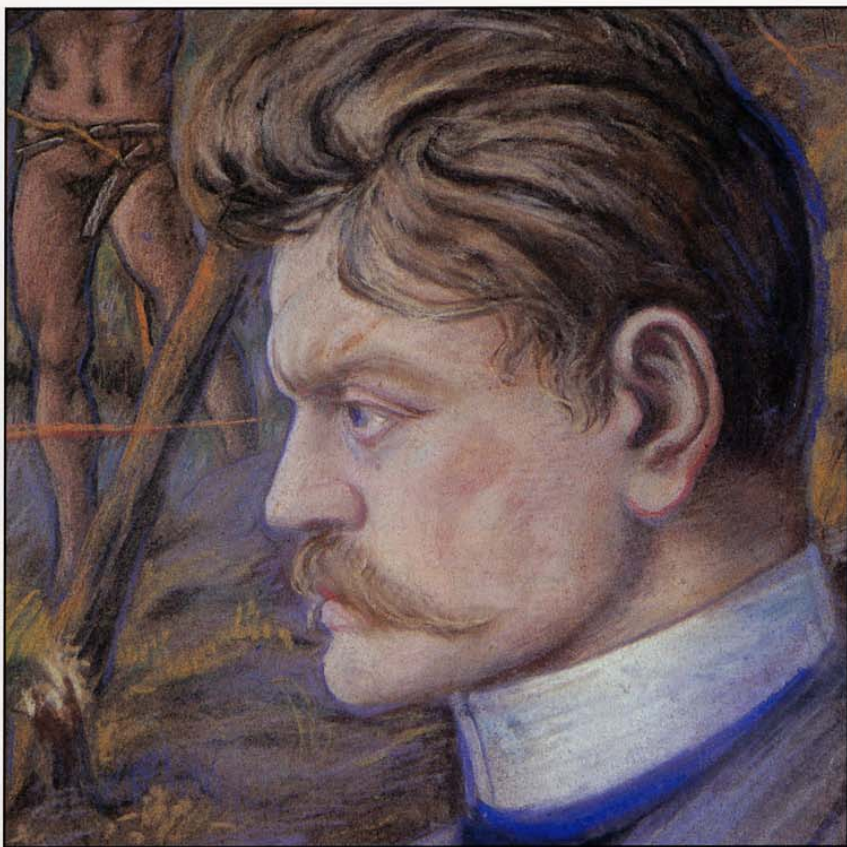
Whereas the *Overture in E major* is the first tour de force, the *Scène de ballet* that followed it is already a major pointer to the shape of things to come, to Sibelius the colorist and mood painter. His contemporaries were puzzled by the delicate distancing of the waltz, the serious undercurrent

presaging the *Valse triste*, its minor key and its predilection for low strings and wind. Sibelius uses his large orchestra with astonishing refinement and colour: in addition to oboe and cor anglais solos he scores in a triangle and castanets. His model here could have been Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* (the 2nd and 5th movements). Despite the few more lighthearted interludes, the work has an element of the bacchanal and terrifyingly demonic about it.

The most weighty items in Sibelius's output (the symphonies and symphonic poems) have tended to overshadow a host of other orchestral works all worth a hearing. The *Overture in A minor* serving as a 'filler' at the concert of his compositions on 8 December 1902 is charming all the same. Seldom does Sibelius appear in such a genial buffa guise. The main section in the major key could well serve as the overture to a comedy; its liveliness and its classical orchestration suggest an admiration for Mendelssohn (cf. the scherzo to the *Scottish Symphony*), while it also displays the unbridled exuberance of *Lemminkäinen's Return* and the simple rhythmic impact of the *Karelia Suite*. The work looks ahead to the *third symphony* and is perhaps the first introduction of the new, classical, and at times almost neoclassical period in Sibelius's output.

Sibelius wrote several of the melodramas popular in the Romantic era and returned to the genre in his incidental music for *The Tempest*. Most of the pieces were passing commissions. The *Countess's Portrait* intended as an accompaniment to a poem by Zachris Topelius dates from 1906 and was premiered in Vaasa on 6 January the following year. The mood of this music, scored for string orchestra, is discreetly lingering. The simple diatonic melodies and stagnant chords create a devoutly nostalgic religious atmosphere.

The music (numbering 15 items in all) composed by Sibelius for the stage has recently been enjoying a renaissance. The biggest works belong to his core oeuvre, and even the smallest create an image of Sibelius as the refined portrayer of psychological states. The incidental music to the play *Ödlan (The Lizard, 1909)* by Mikael Lybeck consists of only two items scored for a small string ensemble of only nine play-



Sibelius by Sigurd Wettenhovi-Aspa 1892 (Photo: Pekka Lehmuskallio)

ers but their symbolic-expressive idiom is Sibelius at its most enchanting. The second of the pieces, lasting a quarter of an hour and describing the maiden's death, makes a magical impression. The chromatic and whole-note motifs and mysterious string tremolos are a direct forerunner of *Tapiola*.

Sibelius's attitude to even his minor commissions was seldom one of indifference. Witness of this is the *Wedding March* composed for Adolf Paul's play *Die Sprache der Vögel* (The Language of the Birds) in 1911. This is anything but a traditional wedding march. The orchestra is marked by the absence of bassoons and horns and it has only one oboe, whereas the percussion section consists of kettledrums, a triangle, a tambourine as well as bass and snare drums. Only in places does this Wedding March draw on the traditional accented 4/4 beat. Instead it is characterised by a delicate approach to timbre akin more to chamber music and a style that is rhythmically, melodically and thematically amorphous. It calls to mind *The Oceanides*,

even the incidental music to *The Tempest*, and *Tapiola*. The fanfare motif introduced towards the end by a triplet on the trumpet has an alienating effect in this skilfully constructed, almost postmodern march.

Among the one hundred or so piano works composed by Sibelius are quite a few 'bread-and-butter' pieces written to supplement his meagre income. Yet even at their most conventional, they always have something about them that is individual and delightful, even the most trifling of them always bearing the mark of the maestro. *Spagnuolo* (1913) successfully imitates the plucking of guitar strings as a backcloth for a lively melody. *Till trånaden* (To Longing, 1913) explores the nebulous territory between deep sighs and hidden pleasure, while *Kavaljeren* (The Cavalier, 1900) is a straightforward, march-like piece which nothing can deter.

Veijo Murtomäki

The author is Associative Professor at the Sibelius Academy whose doctoral thesis was devoted to Sibelius's symphonies.