



Jean Sibelius

**J**ean Sibelius and Gustav Mahler, those two giants of the late-Romantic symphony, did actually meet. Just once, in Helsinki in 1907, when Mahler was passing through to conduct his own *Fifth Symphony*. They didn't think much of each other's music, it has to be said, but as people they seemed to get on. Sibelius later recalled a stroll they took to discuss matters musical: 'When our conversation touched on the essence of the symphony, I maintained that I admired its strictness and the profound logic that creates an inner connection between all the motifs. Mahler had a wholly opposite opinion: "No, the symphony must be like the world! It must contain everything!"'

Mahler's unapologetically expansive symphonies more than live up to this ambition. But that exchange encapsulates not just starkly contrasting views on symphonic music, but also a wholesale collision of two musical worlds – Mahler's Germanic world of musical tradition stretching back to Beethoven and Bach, and Sibelius' fresh-thinking, Nordic world, here determined to distil music down to its expressive essentials.

And it's that free-spirited northern approach to music that Royal Northern Sinfonia sets out to explore – including a complete survey of the great Finnish composer's remarkable seven symphonies, alongside provocative music by other northern composers. Proud of their separation from the world's conventional centres, they do things differently up north.

Ironically, Sibelius started off as an ardent Germanophile. He studied in Berlin and Vienna for three years, and had a deep love for Wagner, although he later called that German composer's music "disgusting, pompous and vulgar". The compliment was returned, by German theorist Theodore Adorno, who icily wrote: "If Sibelius is good, this invalidates the standards of musical quality that have persisted from Bach to Schoenberg." It didn't help that Sibelius had rather naively accepted the Goethe Medal from Hitler's Germany on his 70th birthday in 1935, something that made post-war German musicians more than a little uncomfortable (the Berlin Philharmonic, for example, astonishingly didn't play the Finn's *Third Symphony* until 2009).

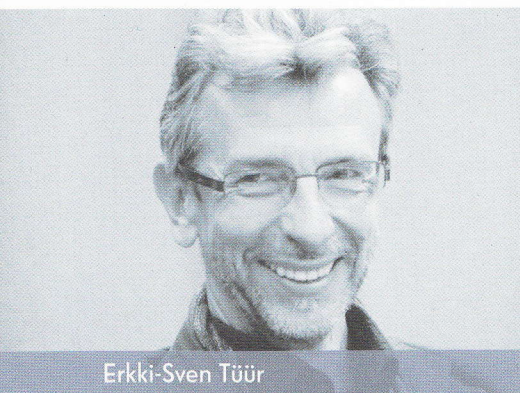
Turning his back on his early love of German music, Sibelius might at one stage have focused his musical creativity on a patriotic promotion of traditional Finnish culture – in the stirring *Finlandia* (Sun 22 Nov), for example. But he soon looked elsewhere for influences – eastwards to Tchaikovsky, for example, in the lush *First Symphony* (Sat 13 Feb) or the glowing melodies of the *Violin Concerto* (Fri 27 Nov).

It might be a cliché to say you can hear the forests, lakes and chilly expanses of his homeland in Sibelius' music, but he hardly hid the fact in works with titles such as *Nightride and Sunrise* or *Tapiola*, inspired by the great Nordic forest spirit. Nor in the majestic final movement of his *Fifth Symphony* (Sun 22 Nov), whose unforgettable horn melody was inspired by Sibelius watching the flight of sixteen swans. "One of the great experiences of my life!" He wrote in his diary.

His Nordic nonconformity is also there in his radical rethinking of what a symphony can be: from the concentration and wit of the *Third Symphony* (Thu 22 Oct) to the austere purity of the *Sixth Symphony* (Thu 5 May), he shrinks melodies down to small fragments of tune, turned over and over, only to erupt in huge surges of brass. And while Mahler thought nothing of putting his audience through two hours of symphonic

music, Sibelius got more slimline. In his final, *Seventh Symphony* (Fri 10 Jun), Sibelius concentrates all his expressive force into a single, intense, 20-minute movement, in which every note counts.

Danish composer Carl Nielsen trod a similarly individual path in his rugged, lyrical music, viewing his pieces almost as theatrical offerings, with individual instruments playing roles. It's something ably demonstrated in his *Flute Concerto* (Fri 18 Mar), which pairs its soloist with such unlikely partners as bass trombone and timpani. Edvard Grieg, like Sibelius, looked homeward for inspiration: his justly famous *Piano Concerto* (Fri 18 Sep) put Norway on the musical map with its lively, folk-inspired melodies, but although the equally famous *Morning* from his *Peer Gynt Suite* (Sat 26 Sep) might seem to evoke glassy fjords and ice-capped peaks, it was actually written to describe a sunrise in Morocco, where the anti-hero of Ibsen's play has been abandoned by his friends. Even Sweden – in Alfvén's folksy, midsummer-inspired *Swedish Rhapsody* (Fri 8 Apr) – gets a look-in.



Erkki-Sven Tüür

This iconoclastic individualism has continued with more recent northern composers. Estonian Arvo Pärt spent years struggling against the Communist system with angry, dissonant music before landing upon his unmistakable 'tintinnabuli' style, which seems to break music down to the rawest of ingredients – a few bare chords, a gentle twist of melody, all ringing like bells. His passionate *Fratres* and intensely moving *Cantus in memoriam Benjamin Britten* (Wed 13 Apr) pack an enormous spiritual punch through the simplest of means. Pärt's compatriot Erkki-Sven Tüür couldn't be more different: he used to front a prog rock band, and raw

directness, blinding contrasts and theatricality are at the heart of his powerful music, as displayed in the hypnotic *Insula Deserta* (Fri 18 Sep). Magnus Lindberg, one of the world's most performed contemporary composers, has – like his compatriot Sibelius – forged a distinctively individual path, but here it's with his sensual, propulsively rhythmic music, including his hugely virtuosic *Clarinet Quintet* (Wed 13 Apr).

There was a time when Sibelius' music was considered the last, tired gasp of Romanticism, but not any more. Now we view him as modern through and through, offering a distinctively lyrical, searching alternative to the symphonic mainstream. There's a danger, especially in this 150th anniversary year, that the great Finn might overshadow his Nordic colleagues, but the richness of northern music, as well as its bloody-minded individuality, still offers so much to discover.

Notes by David Kettle

Fri 18 Sep | 7.30pm | Hall One  
**OPENING CONCERT**

Thu 22 Oct | 7.30pm | Hall One  
**LINDBERG'S SIBELIUS THREE**

Sun 22 Nov | 3pm | Hall One  
**CLASSIC FM: VENZAGO'S SIBELIUS FIVE**

Fri 27 Nov | 7.30pm | Hall One  
**TETZLAFF'S SIBELIUS**

Sat 13 Feb | 7.30pm | Hall One  
**ELDER'S SIBELIUS ONE**

Thu 25 Feb | 9pm | Hall Two  
**LATE MIX: NEW MUSIC FROM THE NORTH**

Fri 18 Mar | 7.30pm | Hall One  
**ZEHETMAIR'S SIBELIUS FOUR**

Fri 8 Apr | 7.30pm | Hall One  
**PETRENKO'S SIBELIUS TWO**

Wed 13 Apr | 9pm | Hall Two  
**LATE MIX: PÄRT AND TAVENER**

Thu 5 May | 7.30pm | Hall One  
**MUSTONEN'S SIBELIUS SIX**

Fri 10 Jun | 7.30pm | Hall One  
**FINALE: VOGT'S SIBELIUS SEVEN**