

Symphony No6

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

- 1 *Allegro molto moderato*
- 2 *Allegretto moderato*
- 3 *Poco vivace*
- 4 *Allegro molto*

'Whereas most other modern composers are engaged in manufacturing cocktails of every hue and description, I offer the public pure cold water.' That's Sibelius on his Sixth Symphony. And in a letter to a friend in 1943, he wrote that the Symphony reminded him of 'the scent of the first snow'. They're apt descriptions. Determinedly understated, even enigmatic at times, undoubtedly chilly and clean, the Sixth is one of the composer's least performed symphonies, yet also one of his profoundest utterances.

And it's a deeply strange work for a composer to have completed in 1923. It flies in the face of prevailing European musical trends of the time, those multicoloured cocktails that Sibelius referred to – the angst-ridden atonality of Schoenberg and his pupils, as well as the arch, witty neoclassicism of Stravinsky and Les Six. It stands in stark contrast, too, to Sibelius' own neighbouring symphonies – the heroic grandeur of the Fifth, and the super-compressed drama of the single-movement Seventh.

In terms of drama and conflict, the best the Sixth can seem to muster is a rather abstract opposition of harmonic modes, between C major and a Dorian mode on D, gradually worked out across the course of the Symphony. It begins quietly and ends even more quietly. Even its orchestration sticks firmly to the middle ground – strings and woodwind; brass, harp and timpani used sparingly; and a bass clarinet (making its sole appearance in a Sibelius symphony) the only slightly unusual addition.

Refuge in the past

Ironically, Sibelius wrote his calm Sixth Symphony during one of the most turbulent periods of his life. He started work on it as early as 1914, and by the time he finished it in 1923, Finland had suffered the devastating impact of the First World War, proclaimed its independence from Russia in 1917, and then lost tens of thousands of its citizens in its own civil war. Sibelius himself spoke of armed soldiers invading his home, and of fleeing several times with his family to seek refuge with friends.

He sought refuge too, perhaps, in the clarity of ancient music, specifically the intertwining polyphonic choral lines of the Renaissance. He had been studying the vocal works of Palestrina while writing his Sixth Symphony, and the disarming purity of the great 16th-century Roman composer's sacred music is key to grasping what Sibelius was getting at in his Sixth. Palestrina's influence can be clearly heard in the simple, slow-moving lines of the Symphony's opening, as well as on a larger scale across the Symphony's broader form, which is more reliant on contrasts of density and texture than on the conventional opposition and development of themes.

The music

The **first movement** drifts quietly into our awareness, with violins playing intertwining melodic lines that bring to mind the Renaissance choral polyphony Sibelius was studying. It's marked *Allegro* (fast), but the sense is of slow-moving pensiveness. The music soon breaks into a swifter section,



though, with a pulsing harp accompanying what feels like a more traditional melody in the woodwind and violins. It then gradually morphs into enigmatic-sounding figures passed back and forth within the string section, with a few discreet woodwind interjections, before the bass clarinet kicks off another big tune, taken up by the cellos. As the movement heads towards its conclusion, Sibelius revisits some of his opening material and moves into a brighter section, but it's not quite the end yet: the violins suddenly remember their Renaissance-style opening, and after what seems like a definitive, brassy C major ending, things in fact come to rest in a hushed D minor.

The **second movement** begins like a traditional slow movement, but when the violins join the slow-moving figures on flutes and bassoons, it's soon clear that the tempo is actually much quicker. Sibelius essentially repeats the same material three times, each repetition richer and denser than the last, before the music suddenly drops away to nothingness with just some scurrying strings – and anyone looking for music to illustrate Sibelius' reference to snow need search no further than here.

The brief **third movement** comes closest to the traditional symphonic form of a witty *scherzo* with contrasting central trio section – a quicksilver, dashing theme for violins and woodwind against propulsive accompaniment, driving it ever onwards. Time seems to stop abruptly in the central trio, though, as the same obsessive, march-like material is passed back and forth across the orchestra, before the energy of the opening returns to bring the movement to a confident conclusion.

The **fourth movement** falls into three big sections, and creates an atmosphere of pomp laced with melancholy right from its grand opening chords. Its second section is bolder and more urgent, with distinctive melodies based on simple rising scales – it might seem like the Symphony is going to end on this vigorous note, but Sibelius has other ideas. After a sonorous climax, he slowly leads us back to the archaic world of the Symphony's opening, with intertwining melodies and strange, modal harmonies, before the work dies away to nothingness.

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