

With the completion of his First Symphony, the course of **Jean Sibelius'** career as a composer – and, more importantly, his growth as an artist – was firmly set. From that point onward the symphony, rather than opera, concerto or any other musical genre, would be the focus of his most important work. Sibelius had reached his middle thirties by the time he produced his initial symphony. With that hurdle cleared, however, he soon embarked on a second such work, most of which he wrote while visiting Italy during the early months of 1901.

Like its predecessor, this **Symphony No. 2** lies very much in the classical tradition of symphonic composition. It follows the well-established format of four-movements – a strong and dramatic opening followed by a slow movement, scherzo and rapid finale – which had been the genre's standard design for a century. And as we saw in the First Symphony, the conciseness of the work's themes and their recurrence in succeeding movements show a concern for formal coherence. Finally, the work's "subjects," if one may call them that, are purely musical. That is, the thematic ideas and their development attempt no reference to literary, pictorial or other ideas (this despite their vivid, expressive and highly personal characters).

The last point is at odds with the notion of Sibelius as a nationalist composer whose music invariably reflects the rugged landscapes, spirited people and the mythology and folk legends of his native Finland. Sibelius certainly drew inspiration from those sources, especially in his tone poems. But he disavowed any extra-musical meaning, Finnish or otherwise, in his symphonic work. "My symphonies are music conceived and worked out in terms of music and with no literary basis," he once declared in an interview. He was particularly irritated by attempts to explain his Second Symphony in terms of a patriotic scenario.

No matter, for this work is thoroughly engaging in purely musical terms. Sibelius opens the symphony with eight measures of throbbing chords. These function as a motivic thread binding the first movement: they accompany both the pastoral first theme, announced by the oboes and clarinets (and echoed by the horns), and a contrasting second theme consisting of a sustained high note followed by a sudden descent. The latter merits careful attention, since it will appear in several transformations later in the work.

A drum roll announces the second movement. Sibelius sketched the initial theme for this part of the symphony while considering writing a tone poem on the Don Juan legend, and much of the music that follows has an intensely dramatic character that seems suited to that story. Some of the most stirring moments involve variations of the second theme of the preceding movement.

Distant echoes of the series of chords that opened the symphony can be heard throughout the scherzo that constitutes the third movement: in the repeated notes that start both the violin runs at the beginning of the movement and the limpid oboe melody later on, as well as in the trombone chords that punctuate the triumphant theme that appears near the movement's end. This latter passage leads without pause into the last movement, which begins modestly but builds to one of the most exultant finales in the symphonic literature.

What to Listen For

The pulsating chords of the opening measures are simple yet stirring, and they foreshadow later events. After a tranquil opening theme, a second idea appears as a long high note that seems to tumble suddenly downward. This, too, reappears later in varied form. A slow movement and scherzo lead to a finale that builds to an ecstatic conclusion.

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