

Program Notes

By Mark Eliot Jacobs

JEAN SIBELIUS

Finlandia Op. 26 (1899)

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones and tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, triangle, and strings

Duration: about 8 minutes

Unlike other Nordic peoples, the Finns originated from the Finno-Ugric peoples. Their language and culture are more closely related to that of Hungary than to those of the other northern nations. It was Finland's unfortunate fate to be the perfect spot for a battlefield between the kingdom of Sweden and the Tsarist Russian Empire. Sweden established its rule in Finland in the 13th century. In the years to come, many members of the elite classes of Finland, including Jean Sibelius, were ethnically Swedish. In 1809, after many wars between their powerful and unruly neighbors to the east and west, Finland became a Grand Duchy in the Russian empire. Russian domination of Finland continued until the Russian revolution in 1917. Finland became a presidential republic in 1919.

The year 1899 was a time of political unrest in Finland. The country had been under the rule of the Russian Tsar for nearly a century. Its people were being drafted into the Russian army and the press was censored. The "February Manifesto" of Tsar Nicholas II in that year stripped away nearly all of what remained of Finnish hegemony.

In that year a group of patriotic artists organized a *Press Celebration* in the national capital Helsinki. It was ostensibly to be a celebration of the press, but inwardly it was to advocate for freedom from Russia. One of the artists in the group was Jean Sibelius (1865–1957), then and now the most preeminent composer of Finland. Sibelius composed a seven-movement orchestral suite for the celebration, *Finland Awakes*, his opus 25. The final movement originally accompanied a tableau of scenes from Finnish history. *Finland Awakes* made a tremendous impression and soon the finale of the suite was revised as a separate piece and titled *Finlandia*, opus 26. It was premiered in this final form in Helsinki on July 2, 1900.

Finlandia expresses the strong national patriotism of the Finns and their desire to be free of foreign interference. Containing no native Finnish folk material, *Finlandia* begins with ominous brass chords and

goes on to a hymn-like theme in the winds in strings. The work concludes with thundering percussion and passionate tutti scoring.

Understandably, *Finlandia* is for Finland what *America the Beautiful* is for the United States of America. The Finns embrace it as their very own. People wrote lyrics for its hymn-like interior section which annoyed the often-grumpy Sibelius to distraction. The composer opined, “It is not intended to be sung. It is written for orchestra. But if the world wants to sing it, it can’t be helped.”

Sibelius’ catalog of compositions consists of over one-hundred works, including seven symphonies. An eighth symphony was left incomplete. He considered *Finlandia* to be an insignificant entry in his oeuvre, much like Tchaikovsky’s estimation of his own *1812 Overture*. Despite the disdain of their composers, both pieces continue to be extremely popular and significant in the modern concert repertoire.

CHRISTOPHER THEOFANIDIS

Piano Concerto #2 (2018)

Instrumentation: solo piano, strings, harp, and percussion

Duration: 20 minutes

This work marks the second time that the Rogue Valley symphony has performed the music of Christopher Theofanidis. In January 2016 the symphony presented the Oregon premiere of his *Dreamtime Ancestors*. The Rogue Valley Symphony co-commissioned both *Dreamtime Ancestors* and the present piano concerto.

Dr. Theofanidis, born in 1967, is a professor of music composition at Yale University. He has had performances by many leading orchestras from around the world, including the London Symphony, the New York Philharmonic, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Atlanta Symphony, the Moscow Soloists, among others. The following program notes for the Piano Concerto #2 are provided by the composer.

Each of the three movements of the concerto has a starting point in poems of Rumi whose work has been a long-time passion of mine. I have written many pieces based on his writings. All three of these poems come from Coleman Barks’ marvelous translations.

The first movement is inspired by a poem called, *The Night Air*, in which at one point, Rumi notes:

...there’s a window open between us, mixing the night air of our beings ... a way between voice and presence where information flows.

When I think of those moments in which I have been closest to the open state that Rumi describes here, they mostly occur in the middle of the night, and outside in nature, where time and my mind seem to be still, and I am open. The first movement in the concerto starts with this sentiment of openness musically. The three-note figure which represents it is also the DNA of the greater work- all three movements have this starting melodic shape, though they take on very different characters. In this first movement, that melodic kernel is always lyrical and expansive, and sometimes even sounds as if it is played by a giant mandolin (in a repeated note, strummed manner) into the night air by the solo piano. There is a feeling of open space.

One of the great things about Rumi is that as philosophical as his work is, it is also filled with surprises, strange turns of phrase, and even at times slapstick comedy to make his greater points, pairing the seemingly positive and negative. One of the many figures in his work who represents this appears in his poem, Red Shirt:

Has anybody seen the boy who used to come here?
Round-faced troublemaker, quick to find a joke, slow
to be serious.

For Rumi, this is a positive thing. So important is humor in perception (and humor is in the end, a kind of letting-go), that he then adds:

I'd gladly spend years getting word
of him, even third or fourth-hand.

This movement musically alternates between a good-natured chorale (based on the three note motive set out in the first movement) with fits of laughter represented in the solo piano part (represented by spurts of cluster chords), and sharp musical punch-lines. This is the most virtuosic of the movements, and requires a great deal of agility and dexterousness from the soloist. And a wry wit and good sense of timing.

The third movement was inspired by the poem, The Fragile Vial. In it, Rumi writes:

The body is a device to calculate the astronomy of the spirit.
Look through that astrolabe and become oceanic.

I tried to have the music in this movement alternate between a single, more fragile musical line (still based on that opening melodic shape from the first movement, but inverted – one lone melody being whistled in a canyon so to speak) with that same material presented in more grand and surging ways, with enormous harmonic underpinnings and broader expanses at its disposal. Both of these representations are to my mind in line with the scope of the poem.

The polonaise is now taken up by the solo piano in the lead. Like the *Andante spianato*, it is in an “A-B-A” form. The whole work is a thrilling ride of pianistic virtuosity and brilliant orchestral colors.

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

Symphony No. 5 in D major (1938–1943)

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 1 piccolo, 2 oboes, 1 English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, and strings

Duration: about 42 minutes

English composer Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) was a great-nephew to the naturalist Charles Darwin (1809–1882). Vaughan Williams’ mother told him that “the Bible says that God made the world in six days. Great Uncle Charles thinks it took longer: but we need not worry about it, for it is equally wonderful either way.” Vaughan Williams’ music is deeply rooted to the English tradition. Unique among 20th century composers, his personal musical voice is made almost in whole from materials of the past. Please note that his first name is pronounced “Rafe.” His wife Ursula said that “Any other pronunciation used to drive him mad.”

At the age of 35, Vaughan Williams studied with the master composer and orchestrator Maurice Ravel (1875–1937.) Later in his life, Ravel remembered Vaughan Williams as “the only one of my pupils who does not write my music.” However versed in the techniques of composition and steeped in the English tradition, Vaughan Williams was always an original musical voice.

Vaughan Williams began composition of his fifth symphony (of nine) in 1938 while on a hiatus from his decades-old project, an opera based on the late 17th century allegorical work *The Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan. Vaughan Williams was in his late 60’s by this time, and despaired that he might never finish his opera. (It was ultimately finished and premiered in 1951.) Saving this resource of beautiful music from oblivion was a great impetus to him to compose the symphony. Vaughan Williams used themes from this “opera in progress” in the fifth symphony (as well as in other works) but did not completely cast them into a programmatic structure. The symphony develops the themes in an abstract non-traditional symphonic form of four movements: *Preludio*, *Scherzo*, *Romanza*, and *Passacaglia*.

The symphony uses themes from his *Pilgrim’s Progress*, as well as quotations from The English Hymnal, such as *For All the Saints*, a

well-known tune that Vaughan Williams himself composed for the hymnal in 1906. The work uses polytonality, the technique of playing in more than one key at a time. This practice often results in pitch composites, in this case summoning lovely antique church modes and English folk music.

The first movement, *Preludio*, begins with a strong pedal on the pitch C, which when juxtaposed with the D major music in the horns results in a D mixolydian sound. This in turn can be heard as the dominant chord in the key of G major, another point of arrival in the movement. This kind of tonal ambiguity is heard throughout the work. The first movement directs itself toward the brilliant aforementioned G major, but soon heads back to its polytonal origin.

The lush and tuneful *Scherzo* shifts in and out of tonal focus, using polytonality much in the manner of the first movement. Some more pointed melodic material creates contrast with the beauty of the movement's beginning.

With the *Romanza* movement, Vaughan Williams makes his only direct programmatic reference to his *Pilgrim's Progress*. In his autograph score, the composer entered a quote from Bunyan, "Upon this place stood a cross, and a little below a sepulcher. Then he said: 'He hath given me rest by his sorrow, and life by his death.'" This is the lyric that accompanies the English horn melody at the beginning of this movement in the opera.

One can compare the continuous variation technique in the finale of the symphony, *Passacaglia*, with that used by Johannes Brahms in the finale of his fourth symphony. The baroque technique of passacaglia consists of presenting a continuously repeating bass line accompanied by variations above. The bass line however changes from time to time, and sometimes even disappears from hearing, returning right where it should be. All of the polytonal and modal harmonies of the preceding movements are gone, replaced with a strong presence of "D" major, including the "D" major horn music that started the first movement.

The fifth symphony was completed in 1943 and received minor revisions in 1951. It is dedicated to Jean Sibelius with the ascription "Dedicated without permission and with the sincerest flattery to Jean Sibelius, whose great example is worthy of all imitation." The premiere performance was given on June 24, 1943 at London's Royal Albert Hall by the London Philharmonic under the baton of the composer himself. It is tempting to proclaim the fifth as the jewel of his nine symphonies. It certainly bears great contrast with the symphonies that come before and after it.