

## Program Notes for Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 Feb. 12 & 14

### *The Swan of Tuonela (No. 2) from Four Legends of Lemminkainen, Op. 22* JEAN SIBELIUS (1865-1957)

*Composed in 1893; revised in 1896 and 1900.*

*Premiered on April 13, 1896 in Helsinki, conducted by the composer.*

The influence of Richard Wagner was virtually inescapable for a European musician in the closing decades of the 19th century, and Jean Sibelius was certainly not among those few who were immune. As a young man, he studied in Vienna and traveled through Germany, where he came under the Wagnerian spell. He was influenced not just by the orchestral ingenuity and harmonic audacity of the music dramas, but also by their foundation in the great nationalistic myths of Germany. Sibelius, who early discovered his calling as a musical spokesman for his native Finland, thought the Wagnerian glorification of country could be adapted to the sweeping legends of his homeland, and sought the opportunity to compose a nationalistic opera.

In the summer of 1893, Sibelius met the writer J.H. Erkko while staying at Kuipio in the Finnish interior. As material for an operatic subject, Erkko awakened Sibelius' interest in the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, on which the composer had previously based his *Kullervo Symphony* (1891-1892) and *Karelia Suite* (1893). In collaboration with Erkko, Sibelius devised a libretto titled *The Building of the Boat*, based on the *Kalevala* legend. He worked on the music for a short time, but, finding the operatic idiom uncongenial and not at all convinced that he had the talent to compete successfully in the high-powered post-Wagnerian sweepstakes ("I went to hear *Tristan* the day before yesterday; nothing, not even *Parsifal*, made as overwhelming an impression," he lamented on August 10th), he abandoned the project. His only other attempt at opera was a one-act piece, *The Maiden in the Tower*, written for a school benefit in 1896. It enjoyed little success, was never published, and was regarded even by the composer as an unimportant work. Following this abortive attempt at opera during his thirties, Sibelius' major compositions for the rest of his life were all instrumental.

The time spent on *The Building of the Boat*, however, was not wasted. The music that had been intended as a prelude was reworked as an exquisite and haunting miniature for small orchestra in 1893 — *The Swan of Tuonela*. Two years later, Sibelius again returned to the *Kalevala* as the inspiration for three additional tone poems: *Lemminkainen and the Maidens of Saari*, *Lemminkainen in Tuonela* and *Lemminkainen's Return*. These four were grouped together as *Four Legends of Lemminkainen*, Op. 22, a sort-of Finnish equivalent of Smetana's cycle of nationalistic tone poems, *Ma Vlast* ("My Country"), and premiered in Helsinki under the composer's direction on April 13, 1896.

Lemminkainen, Sibelius' protagonist and one of the heroes of the epic, is a reckless adventurer, always getting into serious scrapes from which he escapes through brazen exploits or magic. A note in the score of *The Swan of Tuonela* describes the setting of the work: "Tuonela, the land of death, the hell of Finnish mythology, is surrounded by a broad river with black waters and rapid currents, on which the Swan of Tuonela floats majestically, singing." Lemminkainen, as one of the requirements for wooing a maiden of Pojho, is charged with killing the sacred Swan. He fails, and is slain by an aged enemy. His body is cut to pieces by one of the guardians of Tuonela. Lemminkainen's mother hears of her son's fate, and restores him to life by magic charms and salves. Sibelius' tone poem depicts the legendary Swan and its darkly mysterious habitat. The instrumentation utilizes the somber spectrum of the orchestra. Oboe, bass clarinet, bassoons, horns, trombones, timpani, bass drum, harp and strings (divided as many as seventeen ways) — the bright sounds of flutes, high clarinets, trumpets are absent — are used to paint the "black river" upon which glides the Swan, whose strophe is sung by the solo English horn. The Swan's melody is a typically Sibelian creation — and one suggestive of the mythical bird itself: an opening long note is followed by a quick rhythmic flourish and another sustained note, all in the shape of an inverted arch, as though the Swan, floating silently, suddenly but gracefully cocked its neck, rippled the smooth surface of the water with

a quick turn, and then resumed its majestic progress. Though the music, like the river, flows continuously, Edward Downes suggests its structure follows the ancient "Bar" form (A-A-B) used by the minstrel poets of forgotten days. The long melody of the Swan is played twice, the beginning of its repetition marked by the first entry of the horns. The third section starts with the pizzicato chords of the violins.

*The Swan of Tuonela* demands — and repays — careful listening. It is brief, slow in tempo, with a dynamic range that seldom rises above a whisper, and it is easy to overlook its haunting beauties on first encounter. It is one of Sibelius' earliest masterworks, "the first sign of [his] absolute genius," wrote Robert Layton, and casts a spell like few other pieces. "Nowhere else," concluded Cecil Gray, "has Sibelius more perfectly realized the strange magical beauty that lies at the heart of Finnish mythology. The whole work, indeed, although it consists of no more than a hundred bars, is one of the most deeply poetic and imaginative things in modern music."

### **Symphony No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 82** **JEAN SIBELIUS**

*Composed in 1915; revised in 1916, 1918 and 1919.*

*Premiered on December 8, 1915 in Helsinki, conducted by Robert Kajanus.*

For the three years after he issued his brooding Fourth Symphony in 1911, Sibelius was largely concerned with writing program music: *The Dryad*, *Scènes historiques*, *The Bard*, *The Océanides*, *Rakastava*. He even considered composing a ballet titled *King Fjalar* at that time, but rejected the idea: "I cannot become a prolific writer. It would mean killing all my reputation and my art. I have made my name in the world by straightforward means. I must go on in the same way. Perhaps I am too much of a hypochondriac, but I cannot waste on a few ballet steps a motif that would be excellently suited to symphonic composition." As early as 1912, he envisioned a successor to the Fourth Symphony, but did not have any concrete ideas for the work until shortly before he left for a visit to the United States in May 1914 to conduct some of his compositions at the Norfolk (Connecticut) Music Festival. (*The Océanides* was commissioned for the occasion.) He returned to Finland in July; war erupted on the Continent the next month. In September, he described his mood over the terrifying political events as emotionally "in a deep dale," but added, "I already begin to see dimly the mountain I shall certainly ascend.... God opens the door for a moment and His orchestra plays the Fifth Symphony." He could not begin work on the piece immediately, however. One of his main sources of income — performance royalties from his German publisher, Breitkopf und Härtel — was severely diminished because of the war-time turmoil, and he was forced to churn out a stream of songs and piano miniatures and to undertake tours to Gothenburg, Oslo and Bergen to pay the household bills.

Early in 1915, Sibelius learned that a national celebration was planned for his fiftieth birthday (December 8th), and that the government was commissioning from him a new symphony for the festive concert in Helsinki. He withdrew into the isolation of his country home at Järvenpää, devoted himself to the gestating work, and admitted to his diary, "I love this life so infinitely, and feel that it must stamp everything that I compose." He had to rush to finish the work for the concert in December, even making changes in the parts during the final rehearsal, but the Symphony was presented as the centerpiece of the tribute to the man the program described as "Finland's greatest son." Sibelius' birthday was a virtual national holiday, and he was lionized with speeches, telegrams, banquets, greetings and gifts; the Fifth Symphony, conducted by the composer's close friend and artistic champion Robert Kajanus, met with great acclaim. The concert, which also included *The Océanides* and the two Violin Serenades, was given three additional times during the following weeks.

Though the Fifth Symphony pleased its first audience, it did not completely please its composer. Sibelius regarded it as one of his most important scores, and expended enormous effort on polishing the work during the four years after its premiere. He first returned to the piece in 1916 with "a view to [its] still greater concentration in form and content." This version, intended for a Stockholm performance in 1917 which was cancelled because of the deteriorating political situation, was first presented under Sibelius' direction in Helsinki on December 14, 1916. Sibelius again took up the score in 1918, despite the miserable times

spread throughout the country by the civil war which erupted in Finland in the wake of the Russian Revolution: the composer's isolated home was broken into twice by combatants searching for weapons (Sibelius played piano during the episode to calm his family); his brother, a physician, was killed in the hostilities. Convinced by friends to move to the relative safety of Helsinki, Sibelius continued the Symphony's revision, noting on May 20, 1918, "[It is] in a new form, practically composed anew; I work at it daily." (The Sixth and Seventh Symphonies were first mooted that same year.) The Symphony No. 5 achieved its definitive form the following year, and was first heard in that version on November 24, 1919 in Helsinki; Sibelius conducted.

While working on the final revision of the Fifth Symphony, Sibelius wrote that the ending was "triumphal," a description which seemed to invite programmatic interpretations of the score. When asked to be more specific, however, he said, "I do not wish to give a reasoned exposition of the essence of the Symphony. I have expressed my opinion in my works. I should like, however, to emphasize a point that I consider essential: the directly symphonic [i.e., abstract] is the compelling vein that goes through the whole. This in contrast to its being a depiction." For the London premiere in 1921, he asked that a note appear in the printed program stating, "The composer desires his work to be regarded as absolute music, having no direct poetic basis." Though no specific story or program can be reconciled with the Fifth Symphony, it is impossible to deny the life-giving, heroic optimism with which it ends, especially when compared with the introspective Symphony No. 4, so it is understandable that some critics and listeners heard here an affirmation of the human spirit at a time when the First World War was threatening the very foundations of Western culture. Time has not diminished the work's overwhelming emotional impact.

Theorists have long debated whether Sibelius' Fifth Symphony is in three or four movements; even the composer himself left contradictory evidence on the matter. The contention centers on the first two sections, a broad essay in leisurely tempo and a spirited scherzo, played without pause and related thematically. The opening portion is in a sort of truncated sonata form, though it is of less interest to discern its structural divisions than to follow the long arches of musical tension and release that Sibelius built through his masterful manipulation of the fragmentary, germinal theme presented at the beginning by the horns. The scherzo grows seamlessly from the music of the first section. At first dance-like and even playful, it accumulates dynamic energy as it unfolds, ending with a whirling torrent of sound. The following *Andante*, formally a theme and variations, is predominantly tranquil in mood, though punctuated by several piquant jabs of dissonance. "There are frequent moments in the music of Sibelius," wrote Charles O'Connell about the Symphony's finale, "when one hears almost inevitably the beat and whir of wings invisible, and this strange and characteristic effect almost always presages something magnificently portentous. We have it here." The second theme is a bell-tone motive led by the horns that serves as background to the woodwinds' long melodic lines. The whirring theme returns, after which the bell motive is treated in *ostinato* fashion, repeated over and over, building toward a climax until it seems about to burst from its own excitement — which it does. The forward motion abruptly stops, and the work ends with six stentorian chords, separated by silence, proclaimed by the full orchestra. "[This] is in many ways the most nobly imagined and nobly eloquent page that Sibelius has given us," wrote Lawrence Gilman.

### **Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67 LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)**

*Composed between 1804 and 1808.*

*Premiered on December 22, 1808 in Vienna, conducted by the composer.*

Surprisingly, for this Symphony that serves as the *locus classicus* of orchestral music, little is known about its creation. There are vague hints that it may have been occasioned by an aborted love affair with either Therese von Brunswick or Giulietta Guicciardi. The theory has been advanced that it was influenced by a surge of patriotism fueled by an Austrian loss to the Napoleonic juggernaut. Even the famous remark attributed to Beethoven about the opening motive representing "Fate knocking at the door" is probably apocryphal, an invention of either Anton Schindler or Ferdinand Ries, two young men, close to the composer in his last years, who later published their often-untrustworthy reminiscences of him.

It is known that the time of the creation of the Fifth Symphony was one of intense activity for Beethoven. The four years during which the work was composed also saw the completion of a rich variety of other works: Piano Sonatas, Op. 53, 54 and 57; Fourth Piano Concerto; Fourth and Sixth Symphonies; Violin Concerto; the first two versions of *Fidelio*; Rasumovsky Quartets, Op. 59; Coriolan Overture; Mass in C major, Op. 86; and Cello Sonata No. 3, Op. 69. As was his practice with almost all of his important works, Beethoven revised and rewrote the Fifth Symphony for years.

Beethoven's remarks about this Symphony are vague and elusive rather than concrete. The compositional problems he set for himself were abstract, musico-emotional ones that were little affected by external experiences, and not accessible to translation into mere words. In one of his few comments about the Symphony, he noted that, after the creation of the theme, "begins in my head the working-out in breadth, height, and depth. Since I am aware of what I want, the fundamental idea never leaves me. It mounts, it grows. I see before my mind the picture in its whole extent, as if in a single grasp." By "picture" Beethoven meant not a visible painting, but rather an overview of the total structure of the Symphony, from its tiniest fragmentary component to the grand sweep of its total structure.

So completely did composition occupy Beethoven's thoughts that he sometimes ignored the necessities of daily life. Concern with his appearance, eating habits, cleanliness, even his conversation, all gave way before his composing. There are many reports of his trooping the streets and woods of Vienna humming, singing, bellowing, penning a scrap of melody, and being, in general, oblivious to the people or places around him. (One suspects that his professed love of Nature grew in part from his need to find a solitary workplace free from distractions and the prying interest of his fellow Viennese.) This titanic struggle with musical tones produced such mighty monuments as the Fifth Symphony. With it, and with the Third Symphony completed only four years earlier, Beethoven launched music and art into the world of Romanticism.

In the history of music, Beethoven stands, Janus-faced, as the great colossus between two ages and two philosophies. The formal perfection of the preceding Classical period finds its greatest fulfillment in his works, which at the same time contain the taproot of the cathartic emotional experience from which grew the art of the 19th century. Beethoven himself evaluated his position as a creator in the following way: "Music is the mediator between intellectual and sensuous life ... the one incorporeal entrance into the higher world of knowledge which comprehends mankind but which mankind cannot comprehend." The Fifth Symphony is indeed such a "mediator." Its message of victory through struggle, which so deeply touches both the heart and the mind, is achieved by a near-perfect balance of musical technique and passionate sentiment unsurpassed in the history of music. This Symphony was the work that won for Beethoven an international renown. Despite a few early misunderstandings due undoubtedly to its unprecedented concentration of energy, it caught on very quickly, and was soon recognized in Europe, England and America as a pathbreaking achievement. Its popularity has never waned.

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, more than any work in the musical repertory, is the archetypal example of the technique and content of the form. Its overall structure is not one of four independent essays linked simply by tonality and style, as in the typical 18th-century example, but is rather a carefully devised whole in which each of the movements serves to carry the work inexorably toward its end. The progression from minor to major, from dark to light, from conflict to resolution is at the very heart of the "meaning" of this Symphony. The triumphant, victorious nature of the final movement as the logical outcome of all that preceded it established a model for the symphonies of the Romantic era. The psychological progression toward the finale — the relentless movement toward a life-affirming close — is one of the most important technical and emotional legacies Beethoven left to his successors. Schumann, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Mahler — their symphonies are indebted to this one (and to the Ninth Symphony, as well) for the concept of how such a creation should be structured, and in what manner it should engage the listener.

The opening gesture is the most famous beginning in all of classical music. It establishes the stormy temper of the *Allegro* by presenting the germinal cell from which the entire movement grows. Though it is possible to trace this memorable four-note motive through most of the measures of the movement, the esteemed

English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey pointed out that the power of the music is not contained in this fragment, but rather in the “long sentences” that Beethoven built from it. The key to appreciating Beethoven’s formal structures lies in being aware of the way in which the music moves constantly from one point of arrival to the next, from one sentence to the next. It is in the careful weighting of successive climaxes through harmonic, rhythmic and instrumental resources that Beethoven created the enormous energy and seeming inevitability of this monumental movement. The gentler second theme derives from the opening motive, and gives only a brief respite in the headlong rush that hurtles through the movement. It provides the necessary contrast while doing nothing to impede the music’s flow. The development section is a paragon of cohesion, logic and concision. The recapitulation roars forth after a series of breathless chords that pass from woodwinds to strings and back. The stark hammer-blows of the closing chords bring the movement to its powerful end.

The form of the second movement is a set of variations on two contrasting themes. The first theme, presented by violas and cellos, is sweet and lyrical in nature; the second, heard in horns and trumpets, is heroic. The ensuing variations on the themes alternate to produce a movement by turns gentle and majestic.

The following *Scherzo* returns the tempestuous character of the opening movement, as the four-note motto from the first movement is heard again in a brazen setting led by the horns. The *fughetta*, the “*little fugue*,” of the central trio is initiated by the cellos and basses. The *Scherzo* returns with the mysterious tread of the plucked strings, after which the music wanes until little more than a heartbeat from the timpani remains. Then begins another accumulation of intensity, first gradually, then more quickly, as a link to the finale, which arrives with a glorious proclamation, like brilliant sun bursting through sinister clouds.

The finale, set in the triumphant key of C major, is jubilant and martial. (Robert Schumann saw here the influence of Étienne-Nicolas Méhul, one of the prominent composers of the French Revolution.) The sonata form proceeds apace. At the apex of the development, however, the mysterious end of the *Scherzo* is invoked to serve as the link to the return of the main theme in the recapitulation. It also recalls and compresses the emotional journey of the entire Symphony. The closing pages repeat the cadence chords extensively to discharge the enormous accumulated energy of the work.

Concerning the effect of the “struggle to victory” that is symbolized by the structure of the Fifth Symphony, a quote that Beethoven scribbled in a notebook of the Archduke Rudolf, one of his aristocratic piano and composition students, is pertinent. The composer wrote, “Many assert that every minor [tonality] piece must end in the minor. *Nego!* On the contrary, I find that ... the major [tonality] has a glorious effect. Joy follows sorrow, sunshine — rain. It affects me as if I were looking up to the silvery glistening of the evening star.”