

# Dayton Daily News Classical Connections No. 3

Jean Sibelius: *Finlandia*, Op. 26, No. 7  
Jean Sibelius: Symphony No. 5, Op. 82  
Friday, February 23, 2007



Sibelius  
*Symphony No. 5*  
London Symphony  
Colin Davis  
LSO Live  
(DML)  
iTunes



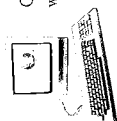
Sibelius  
*Finlandia*  
Cleveland Orchestra  
Yoel Levi  
(DML)  
iTunes



## Jean Sibelius

- 1865 December 8**, born in Hämeenlinna, Finland to Christian Sibelius, a military doctor and Maria Sibelius (née Borg). Named Johann Christian Julius, he adopted the name Jean in 1886 as his “music name”.
- 1870 Shows first interest in music.
- 1874 Begins regular piano lessons and receives encouragement to pursue music from an aunt and uncle.
- 1875 First composition, *Water Drops for pizzicato* violin and cello.
- 1880 Begins to study violin, which eventually becomes his main instrument.
- 1881 Composes first serious works, chamber pieces for two violins and piano.
- 1885 Enters Helsinki University as a law student, simultaneously studying music at the Helsinki Conservatory. After a year, he focuses himself entirely on music.
- 1889 Graduates from the Conservatory and commits himself to a composing career. Meets Aino Järnefelt, daughter of a prominent artistic family. The Järnefelts expose Sibelius to the nascent Finnish language movement. (At the time, Swedish was the official language of the government and of the cultural elite.) Moves to Berlin to pursue composition studies with Albert Becker.
- 1890 Frustrated with Becker’s pedantic approach, Sibelius transfers to the Vienna Conservatory, where he thrives under Karl Goldmark and Robert Fuchs. Engagement to Aino Järnefelt.
- 1891 First orchestral pieces: an overture and a *Scène de ballet*. Hears Bruckner’s Symphony No. 3, which captures his imagination. Declares Bruckner to be “. . . the greatest living composer”. Begins close study of the *Kalevala*, Finland’s national epic, which becomes the source material for much of his programmatic music.
- 1892 Premiere of the *Kalevala*-inspired cantata *Kullervo*, which becomes part of the growing Finnish nationalist movement. Marries Aino Järnefelt.
- 1895 Composes *Four Legends from the Kalevala*, a symphonic suite, which includes *The Swan of Tuonela*, still one of his most popular works.
- 1899 Writes Symphony No. 1 and the short patriotic tone poem *Finlandia*.
- 1902 Completes Symphony No. 2, with a rousing patriotic ending, which makes it a touchstone in the growing movement for Finnish independence from Russian rule.
- 1904 Premiere of Violin Concerto, still considered one of the masterpieces of the violin repertoire. Aino Sibelius moves the family to a country villa—*Ainola*—outside Helsinki, which remains Sibelius’s residence for the rest of his life.
- 1911 Composes dark, turbulent Symphony No. 4, his most modern piece yet. Sibelius begins to be racked

Complete Sibelius illustrated bio:  
[www.abo.fi/fak/hf/musik/Sibelius/EN/](http://www.abo.fi/fak/hf/musik/Sibelius/EN/)



with self-doubt about the direction of his non-*Kal-  
evala* works.

- 1915 Begins sketches for what will eventually become the fifth, sixth, and seventh symphonies. December 8, premiere of Symphony No. 5.
- 1916 Self-doubts recur, and Sibelius makes changes in the symphony. A revised version is premiered on December 14.
- 1919 January-May, undertakes a wholesale recomposition of Symphony No. 5, ultimately transforming it into the form in which we know it today. November 24, final version is premiered in Helsinki.

- 1923 Writes Sixth Symphony.
- 1924 Composes Symphony No. 7, cast in a single compact 20-minute movement, one of the most influential and revolutionary orchestral works of the last 100 years.
- 1926 The tone poem *Tapiola* is Sibelius's last major work. Succumbing to self-doubt and depression, he composes less and less and stops writing entirely in 1931.
- 1957 **September 20**, dies of a stroke.

## “My Kind of Symphony”

What's a symphony? That's what you'd say if the *Jeopardy* answer was, “An extended piece for orchestra, usually in four contrasting movements.” Yes, most symphonies are longish orchestral works with four movements. But the symphony—as a musical form and as an esthetic concept—has always been a fluid construct. Sometime three movements, sometimes four or five. Mahler's *Third* had seven, until he decided to stop at six and save the seventh to be the *finale* of his next symphony.

The classical symphony was an abstract work, with no necessary connection between the movements. Then, in 1808, Beethoven started a symphony with



and didn't stop doing that for the next 30 minutes. Suddenly a symphony could have thematic unity and a sense of dramatic flow. The same day that Beethoven's *Fifth* premiered, so did the *Sixth*, a five-movement programmatic symphony depicting scenes from country life. So much for abstraction. Sixteen years later, Beethoven brought in chorus and soloists for the *Ninth*. So much for the symphony as a purely orchestral work.

In the Romantic Era, symphonies went nuts. Berlioz' *Symphonie fantastique* not only had a detailed narrative, but the whole thing was supposed to be an opium-induced hallucination. Beethoven had broken the hour mark with the *Ninth*, but Mahler eventually topped 100 minutes. Liszt, Wagner, Strauss, and other revolutionaries dispensed with the symphony entirely, replacing it with tone poems and music dramas. At the same time, there was a counterrevolution: Brahms and Bruckner writing abstract, four-movement symphonies.

This was the turbulent symphonic world that Jean Sibelius entered, when he composed his Symphony No. 1 in 1899. “Whither the symphony?” was the question that faced all orchestral composers. Sibelius struggled with many creative questions, in the early years of his career: What does it mean to be a Finnish composer in a world dominated by German and French esthetics? Is it old-fashioned to be inspired by traditional folk narratives? How do you adapt an 18th century musical form to the modern world? Can you write progressive music without sounding ugly?

This is the crucible from which Sibelius forged one of the most fascinating and beautiful masterpieces of the 20th century, his Symphony No. 5. It is both revolutionary and reactionary, modern and traditional, bizarre and familiar. It is a completely abstract piece of music that flowed from a near-mystical experience in nature. It was a breakthrough work for Sibelius, but also the beginning of the end of his composing career.

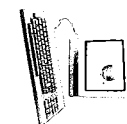
It's a piece tailor-made for the Classical Connections Treatment.

As I write this, the precise shape of that treatment is a mystery. The big unknown is the unpublished original version of the symphony. I hope to be able to walk you through some of the radical changes that Sibelius made as he transformed the sketchy, meandering 1915 version into the vivid, taut version of 1919. But the Sibelius family, which controls the 1915 materials, is reluctant to let them out for critical scrutiny. I'm presently exchanging e-mails with Sibelius's great-grandson, the lawyer for the Sibelius Estate, hoping to get permission to present some excerpts of the original. Will it happen? We'll see...

What *will* happen is this. We'll begin with *Finlandia*, Sibelius's most popular piece, which serves as an unofficial Finnish national anthem. It typifies Sibelius's early style, which created a native Finnish sound within the traditional European romantic



20th Century Composers: Jean Sibelius  
Guy Rickards  
Phaidon Press  
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Official Sibelius site:  
[www.sibelius.fi/](http://www.sibelius.fi/)  
Click on "English"!

musical language. Then we'll give the *Fifth* a close examination, exploring how its sound world mirrors that of *Finlandia*, yet pushes far beyond. To close, you'll hear the amazing final version of the symphony in all its thrilling glory.

In the meantime, please do me a favor... Focus all your psychic energy towards Helsinki, and send this message: "Say yes to Dayton!"

## Evolution of a Masterpiece

In the quarter century between 1899 and 1924, Jean Sibelius wrote seven symphonies. The first is a big romantic symphony, built on the traditions of Brahms, Bruckner, and Tchaikovsky. The last is a lean, modern work that has no antecedents but many descendents. All great composers evolve as artists during their careers, but few changed as much as Sibelius. Many factors drove his stylistic evolution: the general cultural turbulence of the early 20th century; political movements in his native Finland; the First World War; the crisis in classical music's language engendered by Schoenberg and Stravinsky; the composer's own self-doubts, self-critical disposition, and clinical depression. But the most important factor was Sibelius's personal mission to create his own way to express deep spiritual meaning in music.

The years of the genesis of the *Fifth Symphony*, 1911-1919, were the most critical time in Sibelius's evolution. The tortured process of composing the symphony showed the way to his last masterpieces. But it also exposed and magnified the personal demons that ultimately silenced his creative voice.

It's no surprise that Sibelius faced a stylistic crisis in these years. He wasn't alone.

- 1911: Richard Strauss steps back from dissonant modernism and retreats to tuneful nostalgia in his new opera *Der Rosenkavalier*. Igor Stravinsky combines Russian folk tunes, bitonality, and densely layered independent rhythms and melodies in his ballet *Petroushka*. Sibelius's austere, dissonant *Fourth Symphony* baffles audiences.
- 1912: Schoenberg's bizarre song cycle *Pierrot Lunaire* introduces *Sprechstimme*—half-sung, half-spoken declamation of text. Debussy composes the tennis-based ballet *Jeux* for Nijinsky.
- 1913: The harsh dissonances and pounding rhythms of Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring* cause a riot at its Paris premiere.
- 1914: Ralph Vaughan Williams's *A London Symphony*, a tuneful, loving musical portrait of Britain's capital, integrates echoes of English folk-song in a symphonic context.
- 1915: Richard Strauss' extravagant *Alpine Symphony* depicts 24 hours in the mountains, using a massive orchestra that includes 20 horns, wind machine, and thunder sheet. Debussy begins a cycle of chamber works that move beyond the impressionist style he had invented. First version of Sibelius *Five*.

1916: Manuel De Falla's piano concerto *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* gives French impressionism a Spanish accent. Second version of Sibelius *Five*.

1917: Prokofiev helps launch the Neo-Classic style, with his Symphony No. 1 (*Classical*), emulating and updating Haydn and Mozart. Respighi's tone poem *The Fountains of Rome* does French impressionism *alla Italiana*.

1918: Stravinsky turns his back on gigantic ballet scores, with *A Soldier's Tale* for narrator, dancers, and seven musicians. Puccini's *Il Trittico* (including the beloved aria *O Mio Babbino Caro*) continues the 19th century operatic tradition. Bartók's haunting psychodrama *Bluebeard's Castle* advances modernism in opera.

1919: Oskar Strauss' operetta *The Last Waltz* shows that Johann Strauss' Vienna is still alive. Final version of Sibelius *Five*.

Add World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution to the mix, and you can understand why the world of music was in an uproar.

In the years leading up to his radical *Fourth Symphony*, Jean Sibelius considered himself a modernist and believed that he could be an active participant in the style wars of musical modernism. But audiences' cool reception to the *Fourth* had a profound impact on his self-esteem, and—when he experienced the modernist hubbub of Paris during a visit in November-December 1911—Sibelius seems to have realized that he wasn't meant to keep up with Stravinsky, Ravel, and the rest. He wrote back to his wife in Finland: "Let the world go its own way. If you, my dear love, want things as I do, let's not allow anything to drag us away from the path on which we know we must go. I mean the direction of my art. Let's leave the competition to the others. But let's grasp our grip." A subsequent diary entry reads: "You won't be any greater by outdoing—or trying to outdo—your contemporaries in terms of a revolutionary profile. Let's not join in any race."

This decision to drop out of the modernism sweepstakes and follow his own path was emblematic of Sibelius's self-assurance and determination. It was also symptomatic of his self-doubt. Sibelius continued to be exposed to modern music, during his concert tours (he heard Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* in Germany and *Five Pieces for Orchestra* in England in 1912), but his wife Aino tired to insulate him from the competition, when he was home. Already worried about her husband's mental state in 1904, she had moved the family to the forests of Järvenpää, 25 miles north of Helsinki, to protect him from the pressures of



Sibelius's villa *Ainola*

a successful tour of the United States, in June 1914, just before the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo sparked the outbreak of World War I. With his periodic touring now impossible, Sibelius was truly isolated in the woods of Järvenpää. Just as Haydn's isolation in Esterházy 100 years earlier had "... obliged him to become original", the solitude of Järvenpää was the catalyst for Sibelius's artistic growth, as he began work on the *Fifth*.

In his first four symphonies, Sibelius had been experimenting with compressing and combining the movements of traditional forms. This continued similar experiments by Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt, and Saint-Saëns. In each of his first four symphonies, Sibelius had made subtle thematic connections among the movements. In the *Third* (1907), he had merged the *scherzo*- and *finale*-functions into a single movement. While the tale of the three versions of Symphony No. 5 is more than just the question "How many movements?", this is where Sibelius began to move seriously toward his most radical innovation, the one-movement form of the *Seventh*.

The earliest sketches of the *Fifth* date from the summer of 1914 just after the outbreak of war. On August 2, he wrote in his diary: "I'm forging something new. A symphony? Time will tell." Though he didn't know it at the time, Sibelius was forging the musical materials of his last three symphonies and the tone-poem *Tapiola*. The sketchbook he began in August 1914 and worked in through the winter and spring of 1915 contains important thematic elements from all four works.

At this point, he wasn't writing—just thinking and sketching musical fragments. A diary entry from April 10, 1915 reads: "Warm outside, and the winter is receding. Once again there is a fragrance in the air of the thaw, of youth... In the evening work on the symphony. Arrangement of the themes. This important task, which fascinates me in a mysterious way. It's as if God the Father had thrown down the tiles of a mosaic from heaven's floor and asked me to determine what kind of picture it was. Maybe a good definition of composing. Maybe not. How would I know?" That beautiful entry is forging for Sibelius's joyous response to the lengthening of the days and the coming of spring. This



Sibelius in 1915

the outside world. The isolation of the *Ainola* villa and immersion in nature helped focus and inspire Sibelius. It may have also made it harder to address his depression. Sibelius returned from

gives weight to the contemporary suspicion that Sibelius may have suffered from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). More importantly, it illuminates the extent to which he saw composing as a mystical experience.

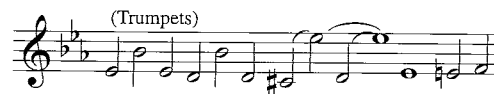
The key diary entry comes 11 days later, on April 21, where Sibelius describes the spark that got him from sketching and manipulating fragments to making real progress shaping the piece:

"Just before ten to eleven saw 16 swans. One of my greatest experiences! Oh God, what beauty! They circled over me for a long time. Disappeared into the hazy sun like a gleaming, silver ribbon. Their cries were of the same woodwind timbre as cranes, but without any tremolo. The swan-calls are closer to the trumpet, although there's an element of the sarrusophone [an "extinct" woodwind instrument similar to a saxophone, but played with a double—instead of a single—reed]. A low refrain reminiscent of a small child crying. Nature's mystery and life's melancholy! The Fifth Symphony's *finale*-theme:



Symphonic inspiration

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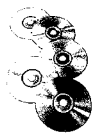
That this should have happened to me, who has so long been an outsider. Have been transported today!" After this magical experience, Sibelius knew where to place his central "... mosaic piece", which became the trumpet's *Swan Theme* that introduces the symphony's magnificent coda:



## 1915 Version

If you're a fan of Sibelius's *Fifth* and have never heard the 1915 version before, you'd be shocked. Everything is familiar, but nothing is exactly the same. This is partly due to the recomposition that Sibelius did between 1915 and 1919, but it's also due to inherent qualities of Sibelius's style.

The Sibelius symphonies are all about flow, about a musical line that constantly changes. The harmonies aren't particularly revolutionary. The tunes are hummable—sometimes folksy. The music follows its own unique logic and develops independent of all expectations of normal symphonic behavior. The first move-



Sibelius  
Symphony No. 5  
(1915 Version)  
Lahti Symphony  
Osmo Vänskä  
Bis

ment begins with a lazy stepwise oscillation between two sweetly dissonant chords



against which flutes and oboes answer back and forth a simple rhythmic figure:



The chords alternate back and forth. The motives do, too. Even the instrumentation. That's Sibelius in a nutshell: take a simple idea, and apply it everywhere. And ever so gradually, let things change. Not in a way that's planned and calculated, but in a natural, leisurely fashion.

After a surprisingly abrupt ending and only the slightest pause, Sibelius begins the second movement. This lively *scherzo* starts with the same oscillating harmonies heard at the top of the symphony. In the background (or is it the foreground?), the strings play little energized rhythmic figures, which develop just as the answering flutes and oboes did at the very beginning. The astute listener might well wonder if it really is a second movement, or some kind of varied reprise of the symphony's opening. A lilting folksy tune appears in the woodwinds, moving in stepwise pairs just like the oscillating chords that began the symphony,



and ever so gradually the piece turns into a bouncy dance. Like the first movement, the second unfolds with a gradual, inexorable development. But, where the first movement grew in melodic complexity and sonority, the *scherzo* grows in rhythm and pulse as a single, long *crescendo* leading to yet another abrupt ending.

The third movement is a gentle slow movement based on an insistent, sing-songy rhythm in *pizzicato* strings:



supported by sustained sonorities in the woodwinds. The pace of development is, again, leisurely. The winds gradually swell, as if to give this piece the same arc as the first. But the strings simply continue to pluck obsessively out their little tune with its repetitive rhythm. The winds swell again, as if trying to generate some momentum. And the strings continue to pluck. It's very pleasant, but you wonder, "Where is this going?" Sibelius's answer is simply, "Going? No, probably not." The movement ends, then after a brief silence suddenly starts up again and finishes with a tentative whimper.

The *finale* begins like another *scherzo*, before giving way to broad, pulsing notes in the horns—the first appearance of the *Swan Theme*, which accompanies a long flowing melody in the woodwinds. The *scherzo* returns, followed by a varied return of the *Swan Theme*, now disguised as bouncy, repeated notes in the strings. Fragments of now-familiar motives appear in kaleidoscopic combinations, before giving away to a prolonged statement of the flowing melody. Only then, as the movement begins to head towards its conclusion, do the trumpets take up the *Swan Theme* as Sibelius originally intended and gradually turn it into a powerful hymn of triumph.

In the end, Sibelius's strange logic makes sense. The earlier movements lack strong, definitive endings, because he imagined the symphony as a single, long build leading to a magnificent conclusion. This parallels the evolution of the symphony in Sibelius's mind: a continuous process of development, experimentation, and doubt that finally becomes clear when the swans suddenly appear.

## 1916 Version

Sibelius *Five* was premiered in Helsinki, as part of a series of concerts celebrating the composer's 50th birthday. It was a big success. But barely a month later, instead of preparing the symphony for publication as he had planned, Sibelius was rethinking the piece entirely. From his diary: "A terrible counter-reaction after all this. I am still not satisfied with the symphony's form. ... I'm ashamed to say it, but I'm again working on the Fifth Symphony. Struggling with God. I want to give my new symphony a different, more human form. More earthy, more vibrant. The problem is that during the course of the work I have changed. ... I'm getting my hands into the retilling of the Fifth Symphony!! It hurts, but it hurts sweetly."

This is partly the hyper-critical voice of Sibelius's depression, perhaps brought on by SAD. In the dead of winter, Sibelius was dissatisfied with his creation and wanted to change it completely. He worked on it in the spring and summer. Then, when all-Sibelius concerts were announced for December 1916 in Turku and Helsinki, he finished a new version of the *Fifth*.

Almost nothing survives of this version. During the final round of revisions in 1919, the 1916 score was destroyed, and many of the orchestral parts were cut up and spliced together to make the new ones. By studying the one double-bass part that survives, and comparing it to the 1915 and 1919 scores, musicologists have been able to deduce the content of this intermediate version.

The most significant change Sibelius made in the fall of 1916 was to combine the first two movements into one. He did this by deleting the last minute of the first movement and the first minute of the *scherzo*, replacing them with an eight-bar transition that combines motives from the first movement with fragments of second movement motives. This bridge passage begins a gradual *accelerando* that continues from the first bar of the *scherzo* to the last. The result is that, instead of two separate movements with an awkward pause in between, there was now one long movement that started slowly and then—just over

halfway through (right on the Golden Section Point)—began to speed up to a whirlwind finish. Sibelius made other significant structural changes to what had been the first two movements: he changed the beginning of the symphony, adding a two-bar introduction for horns and timpani that establishes the opening tonality more smoothly; he replaced the static oscillating chords of the 1915 opening with moving lines that define the identical harmonies; he also redid the sudden, unresolved ending of the *scherzo*, adding 15 extra seconds of high-energy E-flat major to give the long movement a satisfying, breathless conclusion.

Little is known about the slow movement of this version, except that it was approximately one minute longer than the 1915 version. The 1916 *finale* had one major change—the broad melody that precedes the trumpets’ rendition of the *Swan Theme* was deleted and replaced with a fast *scherzo*-like passage, which then linked up with the trumpets and ended almost identically to the 1915 version.

## 1919 Version

Although the original version of the symphony had been well received, the critics were not pleased with the 1916 version. Sibelius immediately began to plan further changes and cancelled an upcoming performance in Stockholm, saying: “I am deeply unhappy. When I composed the Fifth Symphony for my 50th birthday, I was very pressed for time. As a result I spent last year reworking it, but am still not happy. And I can not, unequivocally can not send it [to be performed].” He wrote in his diary: “I have to forget the symphony. I have to go on working. Maybe the sun will shine once again. . . . My soul is sick. And it looks like this is going to last a long time. . . . [M]y composing has led me into a blind alley.”

At this point events overtook Symphony No. 5. A month after the February 1917 revolution in Russia, Russian rule over Finland ended. Months of political instability ensued, leading to the Finns’ declaration of independence on December 6. Within two months, the country was in a state of civil war between the Sweden-backed Whites and the Soviet-backed Reds. Sibelius’s sympathies seem to have been with the Whites, but he kept quiet. Against this turbulent background, in February 1918, Sibelius returned to the *Fifth* and began making major changes. “It has nothing to do with the earlier one,” read his diary entry for February 9. When Red Guards searched and briefly occupied *Ainola*, Sibelius and family fled to Helsinki and did not return to Järvenpää until after the White victory in May 1918. He continued to work on revising the *Fifth* and composing the *Sixth* while he could, but progress was slow.

At one point, he considered scrapping the 1916 first movement entirely, but by February 1919 he had decided to simply proceed with revisions. A letter to his close friend, Axel Carpelan, on February 27: “These days have been very successful. Saw things very clearly. The first movement of the Fifth Symphony is one of the best things I’ve ever written. Can’t understand my blindness.” Carpelan died several weeks later, and—while Sibelius was crushed by the loss of his friend—it seems to have given him new impetus to push on with the new *Fifth*.

As he reached the end of the creative battle, he wrote, “I am working daily at the symphony in a new form, practically composed anew. The first movement is reminiscent of the old. . . . The fourth movement has the old themes, but they are stronger in the revision. The whole, if I may say so, is a vital climax to the end. Triumphant!” Finally, on April 22, 1919, he wrote in his diary: “Symphony 5—*mirabile dictu* (not to say) *horribile dictu*—is finished in its final form. Have battled with God. My hands are trembling so much that I can barely write. If only Axel were alive. His thoughts were with me right to the bitter end. Outdoors two degrees above freezing and sun.” Less than a week later, he was again having second thoughts: “Have cut out the second and third movements. The first movement is a symphonic fantasia and does not require anything else.” So the *Fifth* was very nearly Sibelius’s radical one-movement symphony, instead of the *Seventh*. But a few days later, he had changed his mind again: “The symphony will be as originally designed, in three movements. . . . A confession: worked over the whole of the *finale* once again. Now it is good. But this struggle with God!”

Although Sibelius made many detailed revisions in the first movement, the final version confirms the structural decisions made in 1916. The biggest changes occur in the slow movement, the earlier version’s weak link. Sibelius kept the three main ideas—the folksy *pizzicato* tune, the sustained woodwind support, and the broad, singing melody. But he also opened up the movement, replacing straightforward restatements of motives with imaginative variations. One of these variations is a *scherzo*-like dance, which links the slow movement to the others, each of which has its own *scherzo*-like music.

The *finale* was also significantly reworked, ending up at nearly half its 1915 length. The result is much more concise, much more compelling. In addition to the cuts, Sibelius made a shocking change to the closing page. The 1915 and 1916 versions end with three powerful chords in the winds and brass against sustained strings, then a unison cadence. For 1919, perhaps in that final “. . . worked the whole *finale* over again” effort, Sibelius removed all the sustained sonorities, leaving silence between massive block chords from the full orchestra:



It’s one of the strangest endings in the entire orchestral repertoire. One of the best, too. The earlier, sustained-sonority versions were romantic. This version—with those long, tense, taut silences—was modern. More modern than anything Stravinsky or Schoenberg were doing in 1919. Sibelius had given up competing with the modernists, yet he beat them at their own game.

And with all those silences, if you don’t know the piece cold, better *not* clap until you’re really sure it’s over!

# Dueling with Demons

**H**andel. Rossini. Berlioz. Schumann. Tchaikovsky. Musorgsky. Wolf. Mahler. Rachmaninoff. Sibelius. Holst. What do they have in common? Great composers, of course.

Also great composers who suffered from depression.

And it's not just composers. Depression has affected writers (Poe, Hemingway, Strindberg, Plath, Tennessee Williams), artists (van Gogh, Gauguin, Munch, Rothko). Non-classical composers, too (Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, James Taylor, Kurt Cobain).

Is there a link between depression and creativity? Does an artistic temperament lead to depression? Or vice versa?

Or is it just that the lives of creative people are better documented than those of everyone else, so we know that Anne Sexton suffered from depression, but we don't know of the thousands of depressed Ann Smiths?

I've done some reading, but I'm not an expert on this. So don't take me as an authority. I can only make some informed guesses and tell you what I think.

Whether there's a causal link or not, it's clear that many great composers suffered from mental disorders. In fact, three of this season's "Free Thinkers" were also troubled thinkers. And the one who didn't suffer from any mental illness—Shostakovich—lived in an insane society.

Of particular interest is the case of Jean Sibelius, who seems to have battled depression throughout his career. I say "seems" because the evidence is sketchy. The composer's family is extremely protective of the Sibelius legacy, and much of the Sibelius literature is decades old, from an era when discussion of mental illness was avoided. I understand the Sibelius family's position and don't think a composer's mental health is particularly relevant to us as listeners or performers. It's only germane to the extent that it affects the music or is manifested in the music.



Tchaikovsky, *pathétique* but not pathetic

Tchaikovsky's a perfect example. He had classic bipolar disorder symptoms. He wrote many of his greatest pieces, while in manic phases. And three of his greatest pieces—the fourth, fifth, and sixth symphonies—have the composer's mental health as their subtext. Each of these symphonies has a Fate Motive and depicts a battle against "Fate".

Tchaikovsky called it Fate, but I think his adversary was really mental illness. Symphony No. 6 (*Pathétique*) actually depicts the composer's mania and depression in music. The *Pathétique* ends with a dark, passionate slow movement. Before it comes one of the most hyper pieces in the orchestral repertoire—half-scherzo, half-march—that ends on a wild, manic high. In fact, audiences usually applaud wildly after the third movement of *Tchaik Six*, because it really sounds like the piece is over. Then, suddenly Tchaikovsky begins his *finale*, plunging the listener from the highest possible high to the lowest possible low.

Schumann is another example, particularly in his piano suites and song cycles. Two of the movements of *Carnaval*

(1831) are titled *Eusebius* and *Florestan*. Schumann invented these characters, to personify contrasting aspects of his own personality: Florestan the active, passionate extrovert; Eusebius the passive, introspective dreamer. Florestan also represents the manic side of Schumann's illness and Eusebius the depressive side. The 1840 song cycle *Dichterliebe* (*A Poet's Love*) ends with the poet/protagonist locking his "...old, angry songs" in a coffin and drowning them in the Rhine River. Fourteen years later, Schumann tried to drown himself in the Rhine.

Sibelius's depression is important for two reasons. First, one of its manifestations was periodic crises of confidence, which play an important role in the tale of the evolution of his *Fifth Symphony*. (See "Evolution of a Masterpiece", on p. 28.) Second, depression was one of the primary causes of the long silence that filled the last 25 years of Sibelius's life. He hardly wrote anything after the tone poem *Tapiola* in 1926 and in 1945 burned a large number of manuscripts (which may have included an *Eighth Symphony* promised to Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony).

Sibelius all but admitted a connection between his mental health and the *Fifth*, when he wrote, while working on the first version of the symphony, "I am in a deep trough again, but I begin dimly to recognize the mountain I will surely climb, and when I reach the top God opens his door for a moment and his orchestra plays the Fifth Symphony." In that sentence, Sibelius reveals the connection between his art and his depression: composing pulled him back from the depths.

Today, we recognize depression as a range of symptoms caused by an imbalance of brain chemicals—in particular, the neurotransmitters dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin. But we also recognize external triggers for depression. I can't tell you anything about Sibelius's neurotransmitters, but he certainly had external triggers—some that he shared with all composers, some that were particularly his.

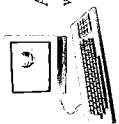
The first external trigger was Sibelius's profession. Every composer has self-doubts. Every composer wonders if they'll ever write a great piece. And, once they do, they wonder if they'll ever write another. To be a good composer means to be a tough, hypercritical editor. But it's easy for tough editing to develop into self-destructive thoughts. Once a composer has completed a work, it's immediately subjected to criticism—from performers, from audiences, from reviewers. It takes a thick skin, to be a composer. And most don't have one! Sibelius read his reviews and took them seriously. When he got a good review, he was elated. When he got a bad review, he was angry and depressed. With respect to Symphony No. 5, however, Sibelius's drive to revise the piece was *not* a symptom of mental illness, even if he was depressed at the time. The 1915 and 1916 versions of the symphony *were* in need of changes. Neither was a masterpiece. But the final version of 1919 was. And it's significant to note that, once he had written the 1919 version, Sibelius was satisfied with it and never contemplated further alterations.

A second external trigger was his health. A painful ear infection in 1902 brought to mind Beethoven and Smetana, both of whom had lost their hearing, and—from that moment on—Si-



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belius worried obsessively about hearing loss. In 1908, he was diagnosed with a throat tumor, believed to be caused by excessive consumption of alcohol and cigars. The tumor, which may have actually been benign, was operated on and treated in 1909, but his doctors gave him only a guarded prognosis. Even though there is now significant doubt that he ever actually had cancer, Sibelius lived in mortal fear of relapse.

A third trigger may have been geographical. Like all Finns (and everyone who lives in northern latitudes), Sibelius was exposed annually to prolonged periods of darkness, and some of his depression may have been due to Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). It is interesting to note that each crisis of self-doubt during the long gestation of the *Fifth Symphony* came in winter. At the darkest time of the year, Sibelius would have second thoughts about the piece, obsess about its problems, and ponder how to make repairs. Then, as spring was returning, he would begin to make revisions, which would continue through the summer and fall, then come to a head in the time crunch of an imminent end-of-the-year performance. Sibelius was aware of his SAD,

even though the illness was unknown at the time. He realized that he suffered from depression during the dark months, but he associated the darkness of winter with creativity and believed that musical ideas came to him in response to the emotional challenge of being light-deprived. While the obvious mapping of creativity and bipolar disorder is get-creative-when-you're-up/get-blocked-when-you're down, in reality that's often not the case. Few people can function artistically (or in any way) in a deep depressive state, and an artist in a true hypomanic state may be so energized that work is equally impossible. The periods of equanimity between peaks and troughs may actually be where bipolar artists do their best work. In the case of Sibelius, spring and fall do seem to have been his most productive times—especially during the writing of the *Fifth Symphony*.

All who love Sibelius's music wonder what magnificent music we lost to the composer's depression in the final, silent quarter century of his life. But having even one masterpiece like the *Fifth Symphony* makes that loss somehow more bearable.

(Thanks to Nancy H. King for her help on this article.)



*Ainola* in winter (the SAD time of year?)



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