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SIBELIUS - SYMPHONY NO. 2

MONTEUX - LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA



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Sibelius SYMPHONY No. 2 IN D, Op. 43

London Symphony Orchestra • Pierre Monteux, Conducting

(Recorded in England)

In his First Symphony Sibelius bowed, somewhat distantly and austere but politely, toward one or two composers whom he admired—notably Tchaikovsky; in this Second Symphony he gravely turns away from every influence but the compulsion of his own creative drive, and establishes himself as a composer of clearly defined originality, with a style and idiom uniquely his own. Here we may observe in their fullness two engaging and distinctive characteristics of his music: the strongly national quality of its utterance, and the stark economy and effectiveness of the instrumental speech. This is the confident and convincing Sibelius—sometimes laconic, always powerful, inevitably persuasive; devoid of the factitious, the non-functional; lean, vibrant and vital.

This may be, as some have asserted, Sibelius' "pastoral" symphony, but it is scarcely more descriptive of his native land than others of his musical works. The spirit of Finnish folk music is always strong in Sibelius—images and atmosphere of fiord and crag and gray seas, of sparsely covered meadows and acrid salt marshes, are always evoked by it; but in this particular work there is something more powerful, something of the aroused patriotism of *Finlandia*, as well as the laconic finality exhibited so clearly in the composer's Fourth Symphony.

The sureness and deftness with which Sibelius chooses the one instrumental voice through which his melodies shall be put forth are revealed throughout this music. It has been said that he conceives a melody and its instrumental expression in the same instant; in other words, that he composes and orchestrates his music with the same gesture. If so, he developed this priceless gift to a degree approaching perfection, for when a melody sings out from his orchestra, we seem instantly convinced that *that* is the one inevitable voice through which the given melody could be so eloquently uttered.

The first movement is filled with the subdued light

of the Finnish landscape. The structural footing of the movement is laid without tentative suggestion in a rhythmic figure in the strings—a figure which develops into a dominating idea in the symphony. The first theme is given out by oboes and clarinets, and the movement is well under way. Though there is thorough development, the orchestration remains eloquently simple. There is lucidity without looseness; there is created an atmosphere of austerity rather than of gloom, of a relentless vitality establishing itself with contained power rather than with bombastic proclamations. New ideas, set forth by woodwinds in octaves, somewhat alter the color but not the contours of the images the composer suggests to us.

There is always a temptation to hold forth upon the "folkish" quality of Sibelius' music. It has been well established, as well as asserted by the composer, that he never employed a measure of Finnish folk music in his work. What he did, though, was to capture, and again release, the very soul of his people through music. He did not *employ* Finnish folk music; he *created* it.

There are two melodies in the second movement that might be suspected of folk origin; they are not. The first comes in the dour accents of the bassoon. There is menace in it, but such an atmosphere rarely endures for long in the music of Sibelius; it is presently dissipated in a climax of savage nobility evoking the orchestra's fullest powers. The second melody is presented in poignant accents by the strings, divided, and then again in the woodwinds. The gloomy atmosphere of the opening measures is gradually modified by one wave after another of orchestral power and vitality leading to a heroic climax.

If there were a program for this symphony, the scherzo would undoubtedly be regarded as the "call to arms," the "awakening of national pride and spirit." The movement springs at once into feverish life with an elastic and vigorous rhythm established by the violins.

A curious combination of glitter and shadow—flute and bassoon—utters the second subject.

There is a marked change in atmosphere with the onset of the trio. Here the oboe has a simple, almost pastoral tune, its thinness and sharpness relieved by, and contrasted with, the warmth and sonority of bassoon and horn. The pliable rhythms of the opening section return, and after a discreet reference to the quiet melody of the trio, the orchestra initiates a long crescendo; this leads without interruption directly into the fourth movement.

Here, if one is waiting for such clamorous and blazing proclamations as we find in *Finlandia* and elsewhere in the music of Sibelius, he will be satisfied very promptly. The chief theme is brief, strong and simple. It appears in the strings, down to and including the cellos. Woodwinds present a second and compellingly rhythmic idea, and the two are developed in a series of climaxes of Olympian grandeur and dimension. Indeed there is here a certain god-like detachment, as if some omnipotent being were manipulating cosmic forces and molding them to his will, without passion, without persuasion, but with power. That the music of Sibelius often seems to lack the quality we call sensuousness, is one of the many apparent contradictions we find in it; for though it seems to lack this quality, it is often the very character of the sounds emitted by his orchestra that fascinates our ears and most powerfully elicits our response to this music. Today's high fidelity recordings, then, such as this one by Pierre Monteux and the London Symphony Orchestra, are a special blessing to the music of Sibelius.

Notes by CHARLES O'CONNELL

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Cover painting by Joseph Hirsch

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