

Longwood Symphony Orchestra – October 2, 2010
Sibelius & Delius
PROGRAM NOTES
By Steven Ledbetter

JEAN SIBELIUS (1865-1957)

Violin Concerto in D minor, Opus 47

Jean (Johan Julius Christian) Sibelius was born at Tavastehusmeenlinna, Finland, on December 8, 1865, and died at Järvenpää, at his country home near Helsingfors (Helsinki), on September 20, 1957. He began work on his violin concerto in 1902, completed it in short score in the fall of 1903, and finished the full score about New Year 1904. After the first performance, in Helsingfors on February 8, 1904, with Viktor Nováček as soloist and with the composer conducting, Sibelius withdrew the work for revision. In its present form it had its premiere in Berlin on October 19, 1905, with Karl Halir as soloist and Richard Strauss on the podium. The orchestra consists of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, all in pairs; four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings. Duration is about 31 minutes.

A failed violin virtuoso is responsible for what has surely become the most popular violin concerto composed in the twentieth century. Though he knew he would never play it himself, Sibelius poured into the concerto all his love for the instrument and his understanding of its peculiar lyric qualities.

In September 1902 he wrote to his wife that he had just conceived “a marvelous opening idea” for a violin concerto, and if he was speaking of the way that the work actually begins in its finished form, “marvelous” is indeed the term to apply: against a hushed D-minor chord played by the strings of the orchestra, *tremolo*, the soloist enters delicately on a dissonant note, yearning as it *leans* into the chord. The magic begins already during the first few seconds of the piece.

But it takes more than a wonderful opening idea to generate a large-scale work. Sibelius struggled with it for years. He drank heavily. He even virtually insulted the German violinist, Willy Burmester, who had encouraged him to write such a piece. In the 1890s, when Sibelius was beginning to make his mark as a composer, Burmester had spent some time as the concertmaster in Helsingfors, and he had become an early champion of the budding composer. While working on the concerto throughout 1903, Sibelius kept Burmester apprised of his progress, and when he sent him the completed work, Burmester was enraptured “Wonderful! Masterly!” he wrote. “Only once before have I spoken in such terms to a composer, and that was when Tchaikovsky showed me his concerto!” At one point Sibelius mentioned dedicating the work to Burmester, too.

The violinist proposed to premiere it in Berlin in March 1904, where his fame as a soloist would have guaranteed something of a splash. But Sibelius found himself in a fiscal emergency (and also perhaps unsure of himself, one of the consequences of his heavy drinking), and he scheduled a concert of his works in Helsinki, with the new concerto as its centerpiece. But Burmester was unable to appear at that time. Instead, Sibelius made a choice that guaranteed failure, by offering the premiere to an undistinguished violin teacher named Viktor Nováček. (As difficult as the work is now, it was even more difficult in its first version.) Neither soloist nor orchestra were up to the demands of the piece, and one of the leading critics, Karl Flodin, a long-standing supporter of Sibelius, wrote that the concerto was “a mistake.”

Nonetheless, Burmester wrote to Sibelius, generously overlooked the slight to himself, and offered again to play the piece in October 1904, nobly promising, "All my twenty-five years' stage experience, my artistry and insight will be placed to serve this work...I shall play the concerto in Helsingfors in such a way that the city will be at your feet!" But Sibelius was determined to revise the work before allowing another performance. He dawdled with the changes and finally brought himself face to face with his revisions in June 1905, when his publisher told him that he had gotten the concerto scheduled in a prestigious concert series directed by Richard Strauss. But by this time, Burmester's schedule was full and he was not available. The solo part was given to Karl Halir. After the second slight, Burmester never played the piece that he had been the prime mover in bringing to creation.

The revisions to the Violin Concerto were far more drastic than simply touching up details of the scoring, such as composers usually undertake after a first round of rehearsals and performances of a new piece. Referring to what he considered the flaws in the work as his "secret sorrow," Sibelius insisted that the revision would not be ready for two years (though in the end, he accomplished them in about a month once he really set to work). Sibelius evidently took Flodin's critique of the first version very much to heart. He greatly reduced the amount of sheer virtuosic display in the solo part. The first movement had contained two solo cadenzas, the second of which was possibly inspired by Bach's works for unaccompanied violin; it disappeared in the revision. He also shortened the finale. Only the slow movement, which met with general favor at the premiere, remains substantially unchanged. (It is always extremely interesting to hear an alternate version of a standard repertory work, because it gives us an insight into the composer's own thought processes; fortunately we can now make a direct aural comparison between the two versions of Sibelius's Violin Concerto, because the original version has now been recorded by violinist Leonidas Kavakos with the Lahti Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Osmo Vänskä.) The original version was more dramatic, more rugged, closer perhaps to the spirit of Beethoven, and certainly more virtuosic. The final version of the concerto, which has become established as one of the handful of most popular violin concertos of all time has more of a lyric quality without denying itself a strong symphonic development in the opening movement, a heartfelt song in the slow movement, or the wonderful galumphing dance ("evidently a polonaise for polar bears," as Donald Francis Tovey once wrote) in the rondo of the finale.

FREDERICK DELIUS

The Walk to the Paradise Gardens, from A Village Romeo and Juliet

Fritz Albert Theodor Delius was born in Bradford, Yorkshire, England, on January 29, 1862, and died at Grez-sur-Loing, France, on June 10, 1934. Although his earliest music was published under the name Fritz Delius, he began calling himself Frederick in the early 1890s. The score for the interlude known as The Walk to the Paradise Gardens calls for two flutes, two oboes (one playing English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, harp, and strings. Duration is about 8 minutes.

Though the English-born Delius spent most of his life as an expatriate in Germany, America, and especially France, his music always seems close to the moods and colors of the English countryside. One of his finest tone poems is actually an orchestral interlude in his opera *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, based on a story by the Swiss writer Gottfried Keller. Keller took an actual incident from a Zurich newspaper of 1847: a young man of nineteen fell in love with a girl two years his junior. Because of family enmity, their parents would not consider the possibility of marriage. The unhappy pair danced one evening at a local inn and were found dead the next day in a nearby meadow, apparent suicides. Keller did not stress the "Shakespearean" element in this story, but elaborated the figure of a fiddler who had been the cause of the parents' quarrel; in the opera he becomes a sinister Dark Fiddler.

The opera itself was composed in 1900-1901; Delius composed the "The Walk to the Paradise Garden" as a late addition to the score for a Berlin performance in 1906. It represents a moment of tranquility linking the last two scenes, lightly foreshadowing the tragic outcome. The piece fuses the principal themes of the opera, combining them in music that is tender, sensuous, delicate, subtle in harmony and orchestration, and suffused with the atmosphere of the countryside.

JEAN SIBELIUS

Karelia Suite, Opus 11

Jean Sibelius was born in Hämeenlinna (then known by the Swedish name Tavastehus), Finland, on December 8, 1865, and died at Järvenpää, near Helsinki, on September 20, 1957. He composed the Karelia suite for a student pageant at Viborg University in 1893 and conducted the music himself there on November 13. The suite calls for two flutes and piccolo, pairs of oboes (plus an optional English horn), clarinets, and bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, tambourine, triangle, bass drum, and strings. Duration is about 14 minutes.

Like most of the nationalist composers of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Sibelius undertook his advanced musical training abroad, in Berlin and Vienna. He returned to his native Finland in 1891 ready to employ his newly-won technique in works of striking originality that captured the moods and colors of Finnish mythology and legend. He had already begun to make a reputation as a composer inspired by the national mythology when, in 1893, the students of Viborg University commissioned him to write music for a pageant made up of tableaux drawn from the history of Karelia and designed to emphasize the links of this region with the rest of Finland. Sibelius conducted the music at the performance of the pageant on November 13, 1893, though he remarked that his music could hardly be heard over the applause (the event was as much political as it was artistic, the entire pageant being framed as a covert criticism of Tsarist Russian domination in Finland).

A few days later he conducted eight passages from his score in a concert performance and then published three of the movements (Intermezzo, Ballade, Alla Marcia) as the *Karelia Suite* (he also published the overture separately). Though the work is light in character compared to the elaborate structure of his later symphonies, it already reveals the elements of his characteristic treatment of the orchestra, in which each family of instruments receives separate treatment, with very little doubling. The Ballade calls for a reduced orchestra with emphasis on the double reeds. The final march is nothing less than exhilarating.