Minnesota Orchestra

Osmo Vänskä, conductor

Friday, June 5, 2015, 8 pm
Saturday, June 6, 2015, 8 pm
Orchestra Hall
Orchestra Hall

We are deeply grateful to Louise and Douglas Leatherdale for their significant Impresario support of these concerts.

Jean Sibelius
Symphony No. 6 in D minor, Opus 104
Allegro molto moderato
Allegretto moderato
Poco vivace
Allegro molto
ca. 27'

Jean Sibelius
Symphony No. 7 in C major, Opus 105
(In one movement)
ca. 22'

INTERMISSION
ca. 20'

Gustav Mahler
Symphony No. 1 in D major, Titan
Langsam schleppend (Slow, dragging)
Kräftig bewegt (With powerful movement)
Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen
(Solemn, measured, without dragging)
Stürmisch bewegt (With stormy movement)
ca. 56'

music up close

Concert Preview with Paivi King
Friday, June 5, 7:15 pm, Target Atrium

Minnesota Orchestra concerts are broadcast live on Friday evenings on stations of Minnesota Public Radio, including KSJN 99.5 FM in the Twin Cities.
Jean Sibelius
Born: December 8, 1865, Hämeenlinna (formerly Tavastehus), Finland
Died: September 20, 1957, Järvenpää (near Helsinki)

Symphony No. 6 in D minor, Opus 104

Sibelius’ Sixth Symphony, like his Third, is performed less often than the others. Concertgoers expecting to encounter the epic majesty of Symphony No. 1, the grand heroism of Nos. 2 and 5 or the gaunt austerity of No. 4—all far better known than the Sixth—are in for a surprise.

transparent textures—with polyphony
Instead, a cool, rarefied air seems to surround the Sixth in music of purity and luminescence. Textures are transparent, colors are muted, orchestral forces are modest, and instrumental ranges are often directed toward the upper end of the spectrum rather than the lower.

It is also a symphony of paradoxes. Despite a predilection for the upper range, this is Sibelius’ only symphony to incorporate a bass clarinet, which is used frequently as part of the woodwind choir. Despite the transparent textures, it is a work richly imbued with polyphony inspired by 16th-century masters like Orlande de Lassus and Palestrina. Despite the composer’s original intention to make the Sixth “wild and impassioned in character,” it displays these qualities only rarely, even though there is no “slow” movement and very little slow music in the whole symphony.

The symphony was completed in February of 1923 and received its first performance on February 19 in Helsinki, with the composer conducting. The score is dedicated to the great Swedish composer Wilhelm Stenhammar (1871-1927).

allegro molto moderato. The opening bars display several of the qualities described above, including polyphony (in five parts), the concentration on the upper range (violins divided into four parts plus violas as the “bass” voice) and the prominence of the Dorian mode, a mode of the medieval church. Two additional features of this opening material must be noted, features that will continue through the entire symphony: the pervasive use of scales,
and a “germ motif,” which is found in so many of Sibelius’ works. In this case, it is the first four notes played by the upper half of the second violin section; this four-note sequence will play a more significant role than that of any of the principal themes, and will in fact be absorbed into most of them.

Although lyrical in character, this opening material is not thematic. The first true theme arrives only somewhat later: a scurrying figure heard initially in the flutes and immediately imitated a notch lower by the oboes, all to the notable accompaniment of the harp, which Sibelius had used only once before in a symphony (the First). Here we encounter still another of the Sixth Symphony’s paradoxes, for this theme is in neither D Dorian nor D minor, but C major! The harmonic antithesis between the Dorian mode and C major will constitute one of the principal sources of tension in the movement. There is a further theme in B minor (a lyrically rising and falling line for the cellos), but it is now obviously going to be useless to attempt to force this movement into the Procrustean bed of a textbook sonata form.

The second movement abounds in the veiled, remote, “cool” sounds so beloved by Stravinsky in many of his neoclassic works. There is much use of the harp, scales and scalelike fragments are omnipresent, and a gentle melancholy seems to hover over the music.

In contrast to the nearly indefinable meters of the second movement, the third is rhythmically alive and invites body movement. It is also a tour de force of orchestral virtuosity, requiring a Mendelssohnian lightness of touch and almost airborne fleetness.

The finale opens with a quasi-heroic statement. In the course of this free-form movement we encounter the symphony’s most passionate and exuberant passages (the only moment marked $fff$ is found here), but the final moments are given to quiet reflection of earlier material as the textures become ever sparser, dissipating into the serene silence of infinity.

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, harp and strings

Program note by Robert Markow.

Jean Sibelius
Symphony No. 7 in C major, Opus 105

The Seventh is Sibelius’ final symphony, the culmination of a lifetime of work in the direction of concision, compression and organic unity within symphonic form. In this 20-minute work, the composer presents a seamless tapestry of motifs, all interrelated, all rigorously and logically controlled so as to create, as he expressed it, “an inner connection between all the motifs.” Sibelius’ Seventh is the ne plus ultra of the single-movement symphony.

The composer himself was at first unsure what to call this work. At its premiere, which he conducted in Stockholm on March 24, 1924, it appeared on the program as Fantasia sinfonica. Afterwards he decided that it did indeed fulfill the requirements of symphonic design—not of symphony in the classical form of the model established by Haydn and Mozart, or even of the later works by Brahms and Tchaikovsky, but in the genre: a large-scale work striving for organic unity among its constituent parts.

motifs seamlessly intertwined
As far back as Schubert in his Wanderer Fantasy for piano (1822), or Liszt in his Piano Sonata and Second Piano Concerto, or even as recently as Schoenberg in his First Chamber Symphony (1906), composers had been seeking ways of eliminating the formal subdivisions between movements, of telescoping several movements into one. In his Seventh Symphony, Sibelius fused the constituent parts into a fabric totally devoid of seams, borders or divisions of any kind. It is not so much a matter of several movements stitched closely together as of several movements unfolding in alternation or at times even simultaneously.

The process is diametrically opposed to that of Gustav Mahler, whose monumental symphonies stretch out to 80, 90, even 100 minutes. Yet, interestingly enough, these two composers had great respect for each other. There is scarcely a moment of silence in the entire symphony; ideas and motifs follow one another without pause, at times overlapping, dovetailing and intertwining as well.

There are really no themes one can leave the concert hall humming, yet the symphony abounds in memorable ideas and events. The opening rap on the timpani is often regarded as a kind of “call to attention.” The ensuing scale-like passage in the strings constitutes one of the “seeds” or “germs” that will engender many of the symphony’s subsequent motivic elements. Three times throughout the symphony the solo trombone delivers a noble incantation that cuts effortlessly through the dense polyphony around it; each of these incantations is a kind
Gustav Mahler
Born: July 7, 1860, Kalischt, Bohemia
Died: May 18, 1911, Vienna

Symphony No. 1 in C minor, *Titan*

Mahler’s First Symphony is one of the most impressive first symphonies ever written, and it gave its young creator a great deal of trouble. He began it late in 1884, when he was only 24, and completed a first version in March 1888. But when it was first performed—to a mystified audience in Budapest on November 20, 1889—it had a form far different from the one we know today. Mahler would not even call it a symphony. For that first performance, when he called it Symphonic Poem, it was in two huge parts: three movements that made up “Days of Youth” and two more for what he called the “Human Comedy.”

Mahler had a love-hate relationship with verbal explanations of his music, denouncing them one moment and releasing new ones the next. As Mahler revised the symphony, he began to let slip quite different hints about the “meaning” of this music. At one point he called it *Titan*, borrowing the title of Jean Paul Richter’s novel about a wild young hero who feels lost in this world. He also inserted several themes from his just-completed *Songs of a Wayfarer*, which are about his recovery from an ill-fated love affair.

But when he finally published this symphony in 1899, he had cut it to four movements, greatly expanded the orchestration, and suppressed all mention of the *Titan* or any other extra-musical associations. Now it was simply his Symphony No. 1.

The very beginning—Mahler asks that it be “like a nature-sound”—is intended to evoke a quiet summer morning, and he captures that hazy, shimmering stillness with a near-silent A six octaves deep. The effect is magical, as if we are suddenly inside some vast, softly-humming machine. Soon we hear twittering birds and morning fanfares from distant military barracks. The call of the cuckoo is outlined by the interval of a falling fourth, and that figure will recur throughout the symphony, giving shape to many of its themes. Cellos announce the true first theme, which begins with the drop of a fourth—when Mahler earlier

**Program Notes**

of landmark on the symphony’s journey toward its final cadence in C major. The *Vivacissimo* is another of the memorable moments, as strings and woodwinds in turn race skittishly in every direction.

As this symphony fits no traditional mold, yet is obviously continuously active in the unfolding of musical events, the Cleveland Orchestra’s former annotator Klaus Roy suggests that the listener experience it as a “tone poem without a story or picture.” Hence, each listener must create his or her own program. Another annotator, Timothy Day, finds in its conclusion “a resolution...the dignified calm of a human spirit which has struggled and won through in a hostile environment.”

**Brief, yet epic**

Despite its relative brevity and the concentrated attention it demands, the Seventh Symphony exudes an epic character. Robert Simpson grandly regards it “like a great planet in orbit, its movement vast, inexorable, seemingly imperceptible to its inhabitants. [It] has both the cosmic motion of the earth and the teeming activity that is upon it; we are made to observe one or the other at the composer’s will.” For its New Year’s Eve review of 1933, the BBC played a recording of parts of this symphony while a speaker recited the experience of flying over Mount Everest. Wind, air, movement and mountain landscapes are also evoked by Sir Donald Francis Tovey in his assessment of the symphony: “If the listener feels that unformed fragments of melody loom out of a severely discordant fog of sound, that is what he is meant to feel. If he cannot tell when or where the tempo changes, that is because Sibelius has achieved the power of moving like aircraft, with the wind or against it. An aeronaut carried with the wind has no sense of movement at all; but Sibelius’ airships are roomy enough for the passengers to dance if they like...He moves in the air and can change his pace without breaking his movement.”

Michael Steinberg concludes his long and eloquent essay on Sibelius’ Seventh Symphony with a few words about the non-existent Eighth, which had been the subject of so much anticipation during Sibelius’ lifetime (he composed virtually nothing during the last 31 years of his long life) and which engendered so much speculation after his death. Steinberg fittingly puts the seal on Sibelius’ symphonic output by calling him “almost incomparably a master of final cadences.” Such will surely be most listeners’ thoughts upon hearing that sumptuously scored, final C-major chord of the Seventh.

**Instrumentation:** 2 flutes (both doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani and strings

**R. M.**
used this same theme in his *Wayfarer* cycle, it set the disappointed lover's embarking on his lonely journey: “I went this morning through the fields, dew still hung upon the grass.” A noble chorus of horns, ringing out from a forest full of busy cuckoos, forms the second subject, and the brief development leads to a mighty restatement of the *Wayfarer* theme and an exciting close.

**kräftig bewegt (with powerful movement).** The second movement is based on the ländler, the rustic Austrian waltz. Winds and then violins stamp out the opening dance, full of hard edges and stomping accents, and this drives to a powerful cadence. Out of the silence, the sound of a solo horn rivets our attention—and nicely changes the mood. The central section is another ländler, but this one sings beautifully, its flowing melodies made all the more sensual by graceful slides from the violins. The movement concludes with a return of the opening material.

**feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen (solemn, measured, without dragging).** In Mahler’s original Symphonic Poem, this movement opened the second part of the symphony. Deliberately grotesque, this music was inspired by a woodcut picturing the funeral of a hunter, whose body is borne through the woods by forest animals—deer, foxes, rabbits, shrews, birds—celebrating his death with mock pageantry. Over the timpani’s quiet tread, solo bass violin plays a lugubrious little tune that is treated as a round, a minor-key variation of the children’s song *Frère Jacques*.

The first episode lurches along sleazily over an oom-pah rhythm; Mahler indicates that he wants this played “with parody,” and the music echoes the klezmer street bands of Eastern Europe. But a further episode brings soft relief: muted violins offer another quotation from the *Wayfarer* songs, this time a theme that had set the words “By the wayside stands a linden tree, and there at last I’ve found some peace.” In the song cycle, these words marked the disappointed lover’s escape from his pain and his return to life. The march returns, and the timpani taps this movement to its nearly silent close.

**stürmisch bewegt (with violent movement).** Mahler said of this violent music: “the [last] movement then springs suddenly, like lightning from a dark cloud. It is simply the cry of a deeply wounded heart, preceded by the ghastly brooding oppressiveness of the funeral march.” Mahler’s original title for this movement was “From Inferno to Paradise,” and this description does reflect the progress of the finale, which moves from the seething tumult of its beginning to the triumph of the close.

Longest by far of the movements, the finale is based on two main themes: a fierce, striving figure in the winds near the beginning and a gorgeous, long-lined melody for violins shortly afterwards. The development pitches between extremes of mood as it drives to what seems a climax but is in fact a false conclusion. The music seems lost, directionless, and now Mahler makes a wonderful decision: back comes the dreamy, slow music from the symphony’s very beginning. Slowly this gathers energy, and what had been gentle at the beginning now returns in glory, shouted out by seven horns as the symphony smashes home triumphantly in D major, racing to the two whip-cracks that bring it to a thrilling conclusion.

**conflicting signals**

What are we to make of Mahler’s many conflicting signals as to what this symphony is “about”? Is it about youth and the “human comedy”? Is it autobiographical, the tale of his recovery from an unhappy love affair?

Late in his brief life, when he conducted this work with the New York Philharmonic in 1909, Mahler suggested yet another reading. He wrote to his disciple Bruno Walter that he was “quite satisfied with this youthful sketch…. What a world this is that casts up such reflections of sounds and figures! Things like the Funeral March and the bursting of the storm which follows it seem to me a flaming indictment of the Creator.”

In the end, we must throw up our hands in the face of so much contradictory information. Perhaps it is best just to settle back and listen to Mahler’s First Symphony for itself—and the mighty symphonic journey that it is.

**Instrumentation:** 4 flutes (3 doubling piccolo), 4 oboes (1 doubling English horn), 4 clarinets (1 doubling bass clarinet and E-flat clarinet, 1 doubling E-flat clarinet), 3 bassoons (1 doubling contrabassoon), 7 horns, 5 trumpets, 4 trombones, tuba, 2 timpani, bass drum, cymbals, gong, triangle, harp and strings

*Program note by Eric Bromberger.*