

Program 3

Spring Song, Op. 16

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

Composed in 1894, revised in 1895 and 1903.
Premiered on June 21, 1894 in Vaasa, Finland, conducted by Axel Stenius.

In 1880, the town council of Vaasa, on the Gulf of Bothnia that separates Finland from Sweden to the west, established a society to promote the city's musical life; the following year Axel Stenius, director of the local military band, was appointed conductor of the Vaasa orchestra. In 1886, a choir was founded in Vaasa and the following year Stenius instituted an annual festival in observance of the late-spring church feast of Ascension Day that featured masterpieces of the choral repertory as well as complementary orchestral music; the five-day festival continues as an important annual gathering of international choirs. In 1894, Stenius invited the 29-year-old Jean Sibelius, appointed two years before to the composition faculty of the University of Helsinki and already a significant figure in Finnish music following the successful premieres of his *Kullervo Symphony*, *En Saga* and the music for a historical pageant titled *Karelia*, to write an orchestral tone poem for that year's festival. Sibelius, then busy with a new cantata for the graduation ceremonies at the University of Helsinki, composed the piece for Vaasa quickly that spring. It was given at an open-air performance as *Improvisation for Orchestra* under Stenius' direction on June 21, 1894, but gained little notice among not only that year's towering choral works (Haydn's *The Creation*, a Requiem by Luigi Cherubini, Schumann's *Paradise and the Peri*, Mendelssohn's incidental music for Racine's *Athalie*) but also a new tone poem by Sibelius' brother-in-law (and musical rival) Armas Järnefelt that took the nearby medieval castle of Korsholm as its subject. Sibelius revised the work for a performance in Helsinki in April 1895, transposing it from the original key of D major to the more pastoral F major, excising an outdoorsy passage with Spanish dance rhythms (and tambourines) at the end, and re-titling it *Vårsång* — "*Spring Song*."

Spring Song, based on one of the longest melodies Sibelius ever conceived and hymnal and lyrical in character throughout, is not specifically programmatic, but it does seem to suggest what Eric Tawaststjerna, in his definitive biography of Sibelius, called "qualities of Nordic spring and in particular its quality of light." The architect Sigurd Frosterus, the composer's friend and fellow Finnish nationalist, wrote poetically of *Spring Song*, "The northern soil from which his music has sprung has never brought forth a purer, lovelier flower than this dew-sprinkled hymn to the promises of life looming in the future."

Two Humoresques for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 87 Jean Sibelius

Composed in 1917.
Premiered on November 24, 1919 in Helsinki, conducted by the composer with Paul Cherkassky as soloist.

"As I approached the age of fifteen," Sibelius told his biographer Karl Ekman in the 1930s, "music took hold of me with a power that soon set aside my other interests. I then began to take violin lessons in earnest from the best musician that my native town [Hämeenlinna, sixty miles north of Helsinki] could produce, Gustav Levander, the conductor of the military band. The violin carried me away entirely; the wish to become a great violinist was my greatest desire, my proudest ambition, for the next ten years." He formed a piano trio with his brother as cellist and his sister as pianist to play works by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven as well as some of his own early compositions, and also appeared as a soloist at school functions and local festivals, but his late start and his inherent stage fright limited his potential as a concert virtuoso. His early knowledge and love of the violin, however, remained important catalysts in his creativity, which yielded not only the splendid Violin Concerto of 1903 but also a large number of chamber pieces for violin and piano as well as two Serenades (1912-1913), the *Cantique* (1914) and *Devotion* (1915), and six *Humoresques* (1917) for violin and orchestra.

The *Humoresques*, issued as Op. 87 (Nos. 1-2) and Op. 89 (Nos. 3-6), seem to have been spawned among the sketches for a second violin concerto that Sibelius planned in 1915 but never completed. Though he described them, perhaps with tongue in cheek, as "on a grand scale" (they require only a modest orchestral complement) and exhibiting "the anguish of existence ... fitfully lit up by the sun," they are really succinct and beautifully crafted showpieces for the soloist that Finnish musicologist Eric Tawaststjerna wrote "captured the lyrical, dancing soul of the violin." The first *Humoresque* of Op. 87 is a gently melancholy waltz of subtly fluctuating sentiments; the second has a brilliant Gypsy flair. "What is so striking about these *Humoresques* is their totally unforced charm and spontaneity," wrote Robert Layton in his study of Sibelius. "They have a lightness of touch and a freshness and sparkle that make one wonder why they are not in the repertory of every violinist of standing."

Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47

Jean Sibelius

Composed in 1903; revised in 1905.
Premiered on February 8, 1904 in Helsinki, with Viktor Nováček as soloist and the composer conducting.

The most famous image of Sibelius is the one seen in the photographic portraits of him in his old age — a stern, determined face unsoftened by a single lock of hair; a thick, strong body conditioned by years of healthy

living in the bracing Finnish air; the aura of a man occupied by the highest level of contemplation, hardly disturbed by the vicissitudes of daily life. This picture of Sibelius may be partly correct for his last years — he produced no new music for the thirty years before his death and withdrew into the solitude of the Finnish forests, so reports were few — but it is very misleading for the time in which the Violin Concerto was produced.

By 1903, when he was engaged on the Concerto, Sibelius had already composed *Finlandia*, *Kullervo*, *En Saga*, the *Karelia Suite*, the four *Lemminkäinen Legends* (including *The Swan of Tuonela*) and the first two symphonies, the works that established his international reputation. He was composing so easily at that time that his wife, Aino, wrote to a friend that he would stay up far into the night to record the flood of excellent ideas that had come to him during the day. There were, however, some disturbing personal worries threatening his musical fecundity.

Just after the premiere of the Second Symphony in March 1902, Sibelius developed a painful ear infection that did not respond easily to treatment. Thoughts of the deafness of Beethoven and Smetana plagued him, and he feared that he might be losing his hearing. (He was 37 at the time.) In June, he began having trouble with his throat, and he jumped to the conclusion that his health was about to give way, even wondering how much time he might have left to work. Though filled with fatalistic thoughts, he put much energy into the Violin Concerto, and even, when he was dissatisfied with it after the first performance, continued work on it for another year, until he felt it to be perfected. The ear and throat ailment continued to plague him until 1908, when a benign tumor was discovered. It took a dozen operations until it was successfully removed, and the anxiety about its return stayed with him for years, but he enjoyed sterling health for the rest of his days and lived to the ripe age of 91.

Aggravating Sibelius' worries about his health in 1903 was the constant financial distress in which he was mired. His family was growing, and his works did not bring in enough to support them in the life style that he desired. He was always in debt and wrote frequently to his brother, a physician in Germany, about the difficulty of making a decent living as a serious composer. For relaxation, Sibelius liked to frequent the local drinking establishments in Helsinki, and his generous and uncomplaining wife often found him unaccounted for after a day or two. Only once did she go to find him. That was when the finale of this Concerto had to be finished so the parts could be copied in time for the first performance. She set out with Robert Kajanus, conductor, staunch advocate of Sibelius' music and friend of the family, and found Jean in one of his numerous haunts. The move to the country house at Järvenpää, more than twenty miles north of Helsinki, was prompted in large part by the need to provide Sibelius with a quiet place free from the distractions of city life. During those years of intense creative activity, Sibelius was a long way from that granitic old man of later years.

The Violin Concerto stems from the Romantic tradition of the virtuoso compositions of Mendelssohn, Bruch and Tchaikovsky, though Sibelius endeavored to balance

the soloistic display with the symphonic integration of violin and orchestra. (This was the main purpose of the 1905 revision.) He was himself a highly skilled violinist who abandoned thoughts of a soloist's career only with the greatest reluctance, and the Concerto's characteristic if difficult writing for the solo instrument shows his experience as a performer. Of the spirit of this work, Eric Tawaststjerna, the composer's biographer, wrote, "The Concerto is distinctly Nordic in its overwhelming sense of nostalgia. The orchestra does not wallow in rich colors but in the sonorous half-lights of autumn and winter; only on rare occasions does the horizon brighten and glow."

The opening movement employs sonata form, modified in that a succinct cadenza for the soloist replaces the usual development section. The exposition consists of three theme groups — a doleful melody announced by the soloist over murmuring strings, a yearning theme initiated by bassoons and cellos with rich accompaniment, and a bold, propulsive strophe in march rhythm. The development-cadenza is built on the opening motive and leads directly into the recapitulation of the exposition themes, here considerably altered from their initial appearances. A coda, filled with flashing figurations for the soloist, closes the movement.

The second movement could well be called a "Romanza," a descendant of the long-limbed lyricism of the *Andantes* of the violin concertos of Mozart. It is among the most avowedly Romantic music in any of Sibelius' works for orchestra. The finale launches into a robust dance whose theme the eminent English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey thought might be "a polonaise for polar bears." A bumptious energy fills the movement, giving it an air reminiscent of the Gypsy finales of many 19th-century violin concertos. The form is sonatina, a sonata without development, here employing two large theme groups. The soloist's part accumulates difficulties as it goes, leading to an abrupt but resounding close.

Symphony No. 6 in B minor, Op. 54 Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Composed in 1939.

Premiered on December 3, 1939 in Moscow, conducted by Yevgeny Mravinsky.

Shostakovich was a boy of ten, and already composing, when the Russian Revolution erupted in 1917. As early as 1924, he considered writing a musical tribute to the great hero of that uprising, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, and made several starts on such a work during the 1930s. In 1936, however, came the scathing condemnation of his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, a punishing attack upon his modernist tendencies which he sought to redress with the Fifth Symphony. The success of the Symphony brought him letters of congratulations and advice from across the Soviet Union, most of which encouraged him to continue writing in the affirmative spirit of the new work. In the Moscow journal *Soviet Art* of November 11, 1938, Shostakovich announced that he was undertaking a monumental choral symphony to express "through the medium of sound the immortal image of Lenin as a great son of the Russian people and a great leader and

teacher of the masses;" he proposed to draw the texts from the verses of Caucasian folk and peasant poets, as well as from Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Ode to Lenin*.

Interest in Shostakovich's new piece ran high, and he must have felt some reluctance in giving notice that he had to put off the "Lenin" symphony because "embodying in art the gigantic figure of this leader is an incredibly difficult task." (It was not until the Twelfth Symphony of 1961, titled "The Year 1917," that Shostakovich finally completed his musical tribute to the memory of Lenin.) The work that instead appeared in 1939 was a disappointment to the critics and listeners who were expecting from Shostakovich a panoramic composition for chorus and orchestra, since the new Symphony No. 6 was modest in dimensions, lacking in extra-musical associations and, by turns, stern and satiric in mood. The Symphony was paid little attention when it was premiered during the two-month "Festival of Soviet Music" in Moscow, being overshadowed at that event by the success of patriotic cantatas by Prokofiev (*Alexander Nevsky*), Shaporin (*On Kulikov Field*) and Koval (*Emelian Pugatchov*). The Sixth Symphony, however, has since come to be regarded as one of Shostakovich's greatest achievements in the genre.

The Symphony's unusual structure — the customary fast opening movement is omitted, so that the work consists of only a vast slow first movement, a scherzo and a whirling finale — caused some consternation to those looking for programmatic "meaning" behind the notes. The critic Ivan Martinov felt that the first movement represented the "dreary life of the people in Czarist times" and the later movements "their joy under the Soviet regime." In his study of Shostakovich's symphonies, Hugh Ottaway found the *Largo* expressive not of patriotic pictures, however, but of the composer's "capacity for tragic emotion, and for inner aspiration, rather than anything more concrete." Shostakovich himself said when the Symphony was new that it was "an effort to convey the mood of spring, joy and life," but this statement has little to do with the spirit of the music, and was seemingly just a sop that he tossed to the operators of the Soviet propaganda mills. Even in his purported memoirs (*Testimony*, 1979), he had almost nothing to say about the Sixth Symphony, other than remarking upon its general connection with Stalin's numbing brutality, which hung like a pall over the period of the composer's life when the work was conceived. Ray Blokker offered perhaps the most sensible approach to this composition when he wrote that it was not meant to convey any "program" or to provide the grandeur and affirmation of the Fifth Symphony. "Instead," Blokker concluded, "it aims at a more modest target: that of providing sheer musical enjoyment for both musicians and audiences."

The influence of Mahler on Shostakovich is plainly evident in the Sixth Symphony in its often sparse, chamber-like textures, the profound nature of its emotional

expression, and its juxtaposition of music of widely different characters. The Symphony begins with a slow movement in two-part form to which is added a brief concluding section that returns the opening themes. The two motives that dominate the first section are presented in close order. One theme, played immediately by low woodwinds and low strings in unison, is characterized by its triplet rhythms and octave leaps. The other theme, appearing in the seventh measure in the violins and flutes, has a fall of the interval of a diminished seventh (a progression reserved by Bach and other Baroque composers for their most deeply felt melodies) and a snarling trill. These two themes are masterfully combined, juxtaposed and intertwined in the following pages without losing either their emotional intensity or their broad lyricism. The movement's second section largely comprises a series of passages for instruments in soloistic combinations. The English horn is the first to give the theme, a dirge-like strain that fluctuates between minor and major modes. The flutes, clarinets, oboe and violins are entrusted with the sad, fragmented melody as the section unfolds. A mournful, almost motionless plaint from the solo horn serves as the transition to the closing pages, less a true recapitulation of the opening themes than a *résumé* of their melodic essentials and emotional natures. Edward Downes wrote that this *Largo* "is some of the finest music Shostakovich has given us; one of his most thoughtful, least self-conscious, least rhetorical and most spontaneous symphonic movements."

The second movement is a scherzo anointed with Shostakovich's most biting humor. The central portion of the movement is distinguished by awkward rhythmic syncopations and a single-pitch ostinato that hammers away incessantly in various instruments until the return of the scherzo. The finale bursts with a bristling wit reminiscent of the more caustic strains of Prokofiev. A number of themes are presented and discussed before the beginning of the second section, a heavy dance in pounding triple meter. The solo violin initiates the recall of the opening themes, which are complemented by a boisterous tune that sounds like a Slavic refugee from a feverish Broadway show. The Symphony ends with the full orchestra hurling forth this brash melody.

Wrote Leopold Stokowski, conductor of the American premiere of the Sixth Symphony in Philadelphia in 1940, "In each symphony Shostakovich shows himself to be more of a master, to be ever growing, ever expanding in his imagination and musical consciousness. In his Sixth Symphony, he has reached new depths, especially in the first part. Here are harmonic sequences, and several melodies sounding at the same time, making modern counterpoint, which are of great originality and intensity of expression. At first they sound strange and even obscure, as if the meaning was concealed and hidden. But after hearing this music ... it becomes clear, and has great depth of expression."

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