

Concert 2 – Nordic Triumph

November 16, 2019

Overture to *Maskarade* —Carl Nielsen

Carl Nielsen is now acknowledged as Denmark's most distinguished composer, and more than deserving to take his place with Grieg and Sibelius in the pantheon of Scandinavia's long-revered composers. It was not always so, of course, and it was not until the middle of the twentieth century that his music enjoyed broad admiration, study, and performance. Not that he ever languished in obscurity, for by his forties, he was regarded as Denmark's leading musician. He grew up in modest circumstances—certainly not a prodigy—studied assiduously, played in several unpretentious ensembles on various instruments, and began composing in small forms. He was intellectually curious, reading and pondering philosophy, history, and literature, and it must be said, was profoundly aided in his overall growth as a composer and in general intellectual sophistication by his long marriage to a remarkable woman.

His wife, Anne Marie Brodersen, was a recognized major sculptor, a “strong-willed and modern-minded woman” who was relentless in the pursuit of her own, very successful career as an artist. Her independence—and penchant for frequently leaving the family to pursue her own career—impacted the tranquility of the marriage, without doubt. But, she was a stimulating, strong partner that unquestionably aided in his development into an artist of spiritual depth and sophistication.

Nielsen's reputation outside of Denmark is largely sustained by his six symphonies—Leonard Bernstein was an influential international champion of them—but he composed actively in almost all major genres. From song and choral music to chamber works, he left behind a rich musical legacy. His musical style, rooted early on in the model of Mozart and Beethoven, and later, Brahms, evolved with the times, as the nineteenth century yielded to the twentieth. By the nineteen-twenties his works explored many of the progressive harmonic and structural innovations of late-Romanticism and Neo-Classicism. But, it was only after the hegemony of Schoenberg and his disciples waned after World War II that his works began to be respected internationally, and not dismissed as hopeless examples of naïve, of out-of-date musical style.

Notwithstanding his reputation as a symphonist, he did write two operas, the second of which, *Maskarade*, premièred in 1906 in Copenhagen. It was a spectacular success, and to this day is more or less the national opera of Denmark, in similar fashion to *The Bartered Bride* of Smetana in the Czech Republic. It's a comic opera of mistaken identities, and—especially the first act—is now regarded as one of the finest comic operas of the twentieth century in any country. The vivacious, scintillating overture is a perfect representation of the ingratiating music of the opera, and is now an audience favorite worldwide.

Piano Concerto in A Minor, op. 16—Edvard Grieg

Easily Grieg's most famous work, his piano concerto was composed in 1868, when the composer was only twenty-five years of age. Married the year before, he, his wife, and their two-month old daughter were in Denmark, escaping the rigorous

Norwegian climate. Grieg was an excellent pianist—it was a major focus of his life as a composer—and had the privilege of hearing Schumann’s piano concerto played by Schumann’s wife, the great virtuosa, Clara Schumann, while a student at the Leipzig conservatory. It has long been generally accepted that the Schumann composition informed much of the young Grieg’s concerto. With its multitude of attractive melodies and its dramatic musical rhetoric, it became a Norwegian favorite almost immediately—although the rest of the world warmed to it gradually. The greatest pianist of the time, Franz Liszt, however, read through it early on and praised it with unreserved enthusiasm. Later, near the end of Grieg’s life, Percy Grainger—a leading piano virtuoso of the time—spent time with Grieg in Norway studying the work, and promoted it for the next half century.

Grieg’s musical panache is in evidence from the beginning when the timpani crescendos right into the soloist’s big-time entry. This dramatic beginning is followed by a winsome succession of tunes—seven, all told—memorably led by the melody in the cellos accompanied by trombone chords. The tender second movement has been associated with Grieg’s response to the recent birth of his daughter, Alexandra. The last movement is based upon the rhythms of the traditional Norwegian folkdance, the *halling*, with a lyrical diversion in the middle, featuring a solo flute.

While the popular idea of Grieg today may pigeonhole him as a late Romantic nationalist, master of ingratiating tunes, and painter of quaint Scandinavian scenes, he is much more. He was strongly influential upon Debussy—especially in comparing their respective string quartets—and also upon the evolution of advanced harmonic thinking in general. In a famous exaggeration, Frederick Delius observed that: “Modern French music is simply Grieg plus the prelude to the third act of *Tristan*.” Persiflage perhaps, but more than a grain of truth.

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, op. 43—Jean Sibelius

The compositions of Jean Sibelius constitute a case study in the capriciousness of musical taste and the power of the artistic *avant garde*. Pigeonholed by many as primarily a Finnish nationalist, whose dark, remote music was a shallow representative of Romanticism’s last gasps, Sibelius was nevertheless deemed the champion of American and British conservative musical tastes between the world wars. Typical was Olin Downes, music critic of the *Times*, whose relentless public support of Sibelius bordered on sycophancy. Likewise, Koussevitsky, conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, programmed a cycle of Sibelius’s symphonies, and dogged the composer to finish the eighth—which he never did. But, those who favored Stravinsky, Schönberg, and company—and that included most of continental Europe, and American intellectuals—were scathing in their contempt. One respected and well-known critic entitled an essay about Sibelius “The Worst Composer in the World.” These controversies, and Sibelius’s life-long struggle with alcoholism and depression no doubt played a signal part in his composing nothing of significance from the nineteen thirties until his death in 1957 at the age of 91.

But tastes change, and the current crop of composers and scholars now take a more balanced view of Sibelius’s compositions. His seven symphonies enjoy renewed respect, although the ever-popular *Symphony No.2* has long been a repertory standard,

and—other than the evergreen *Finlandia*—is his most popular work. It is not incorrect, of course, to recognize the deeply informing rôle of nationalist Finnish elements in his music style. He consciously and assiduously studied and absorbed the musical and literary heritage of the Finnish culture and adroitly folded them into a unique personal style. He was completely taken by the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, and early on his musical style reflected these cultural elements, from his melodic choices to the stories behind his tone poems. His symphonies are large soundscapes that surge and ebb, whose melodies often appear first as small kernels of a few notes whose significance is easily overlooked. But, as the music unfolds and these bits of melody appear in a kaleidoscope of identities, they meld together into great torrents of themes. Sibelius was a master of orchestration, and most listeners easily accept the inevitable comparisons to the bleak, cold, primæval landscapes of Finland.

Finland for centuries had been under Swedish hegemony, and then in the nineteenth century under Russian control. Many still remember Finland's heroic stand against the Soviets early in WWII (although their later coöperation with the Nazis troubled many). Sibelius's second symphony depicts, indeed, a defiant and bold stand for Finnish independence during its struggles with Russia around the turn of the twentieth century. Composed in 1902, the symphony is usually understood as a gesture of defiance in the face of the Tsar, although the composer never suggested this view. The first movement opens quietly in a fashion typical of the composer's style—no big tunes to hear and remember, but, as alluded to above, just some little fragments that gradually assemble themselves. Then the process reverses itself, and the bits close the movement peacefully. The second movement is a slow sonata form that begins with a remarkable pizzicato section in the cellos and double basses, followed by a somewhat sinister theme in the bassoons. In a fashion traditional from Mozart on, we next hear a lyrical contrasting theme in the strings. Most symphonies use a brisk dance form for third movements. Here Sibelius begins with energetic string figurations that soon are followed in the middle sections by a pastoral oboe solo. Then, as usual in these matters, the string section returns. This movement is blended right into the beginning of the famous last movement, one almost universally loved—well, at least known—by music lovers everywhere. Clear themes prevail, the most familiar one being the ascending three note stepwise motif. The movement closes heroically with a huge statement of this melody, with the complete brass section taking the lead. The careful listener will note that this little theme has appeared in many guises throughout the whole work. This is typical of Sibelius's craftsmanship and integrated approach to composition. In many ways this glorious finale affords the composer the last laugh over his “sophisticated” detractors.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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