

Symphony No 7 by Jean Sibelius

Originally entitled as a symphonic fantasy, Sibelius's Seventh runs for not much more than twenty minutes and is one of the shortest symphonies in the repertoire. Yet despite its brevity there is nothing lightweight or small scale about this piece. Startlingly original in conception and design, the work has the novelty of being cast in just one movement and is permeated by what seem to be massive undercurrents guided by primeval forces. In many ways, the work represented the zenith of Sibelius' vision of symphonic form as a fully integrated unified structure in which a simple idea or cell organically evolves, grows tendrils, morphs, and eventually explodes while eschewing conventional symphonic transitions. So expertly did he realize his ambition for such seamless flow within this work he seems to have set himself up for failure thereafter. How else to explain the deafening silence for the remaining 33 years of his life during which he produced little else of substance apart from the tone poem *Tapiola*?

Alcoholism, depression, and relentless self-doubt were likely contributing factors. In his letters it is evident that he went on to complete what would have been his Eighth symphony but sadly he chose not to bestow it onto the world and instead, in a great auto-da-fé witnessed by his wife, consigned it along with a great many other papers into the fireplace where it went up in flames. Sibelius told friends: "If I cannot write a better symphony than my Seventh, then it shall be my last." One is reminded of Voltaire's saying that "perfect is the enemy of the good."

The germ from which the symphony begins could not be simpler: a soft timpani roll followed by a rising scale in C major, the key that is at the center of the musical universe yet one that had also been virtually written off as having nothing left to say. Commenting on the Seventh, the British composer Vaughan Williams remarked that only Sibelius could make C major sound completely fresh. Notwithstanding the simplicity of the idea, Sibelius staggers the rising scale so that basses and celli appear to be dragging behind the upper strings, giving a richer texture like some primordial creature slowly emerging with lumbering gait from the ooze.

The ascent soon lands on the unexpectedly remote chord of A-flat minor and we are then launched on our way first with a hints of a thematic motif that we will hear many times later in the symphony, and then by a hauntingly beautiful chorale played first in the lower strings thereafter joined in the upper registers by the violins. The chorale builds in intensity reaching a climax when the first trombone enters with a majestic thematic landmark that makes two more appearances in the symphony, always in C: first sunlit in C major, then later in C minor, against a totally different ambience, as the strings playing dark undulating chromatic runs. The latter effect, Sibelius noted in his diaries, was like the moon (represented by the trombone) seen through storm clouds scudding past (represented by the strings). The use of such changing textures and tempi along with a potent cocktail of melancholy and angst are what power this work along especially in the intervening scherzo-like sections.

Later on as we approach the third and grandest appearance of the trombone theme, Sibelius once again deploys a multilayered texture this time with horns playing a slow-rising C scale, and the tempo gradually losing momentum giving the impression of time itself slowing down. It's a

powerful effect that counterintuitively racks up the tension over a sustained period. Gradually the strings climb an ascending scale until they reach a high alternating pattern of such blazing intensity that we feel something truly astonishing must be about to happen. The final climactic release is announced by a big whoop in the horns and woodwind, a powerful blast on the timpani, and a leap into the heavens by the strings marked *fff*. It's a thrilling, spine-tingling moment that if you know this piece well, you will be waiting for right from the first measure of the symphony. It's almost the musical equivalent of a supernova event: as a star runs out of fuel, its core is no longer able to support itself under its own weight, and suddenly gravitational collapse kicks in triggering a cataclysmic explosion. What comes next are the dying remnants of the catastrophe. The strings collapse from the heavens, strains of the trombone theme are heard in horns, and in the last gasp we hear the resolution of the scale that started this whole thing with a final blast of C major.

Program notes by Julian Brown © 2014

For Palo Alto Philharmonic