SIBELIUS AND TCHAIKOVSKY

EJ Thomas Performing Arts Hall
Saturday, October 26, 2013 | 8:00 pm

Christopher Wilkins, conductor
Martina Filjak, piano
Cynthia Warren, English horn

JEAN SIBELIUS
(1865-1957)

Jean Sibelius

Finlandia, Op. 26

The Swan of Tuonela

Cynthia Warren, English horn

Symphony No. 7 in C major, Op. 105
Adagio – Vivacissimo – Adagio – Allegro moderato – Adagio

Intermission

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY
(1840-1893)

Piano Concerto No. 1 in Bb minor, Op. 23
Allegro non troppo e molto maestoso – Allegro con spirito
Andante semplice – Prestissimo – Tempo I
Allegro con fuoco

Martina Filjak, piano

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“Suomi” (the Finns’ name for their country), menacing Finland have not succeeded in speak not of halcyon colonialism but of The opening lines of the scene’s text, however, Tsar Alexander II during the 19th century.”

Finland was the music that solidified Sibelius’ international reputation, and it became a focus for world-wide sympathy with the plight of the Finns. In 1905, a year after Bobrikov had been assassinated, Caesar-like, in the halls of the Finnish Senate, Nicholas II granted sweeping concessions to the Finns (the country became independent of Russia as a result of the First World War), and Finlandia could at last be heard freely in its homeland. The hymnal theme of Finlandia has a directness and simplicity that suggest folksong, yet Sibelius insisted, “I have never used a theme that was not of my own invention. Thus the thematic material of Finlandia is entirely my own.” As a preface to this inspirational melody, Sibelius provided a portentous introduction of sullen brass chords, which are subsequently appropriated by the full orchestra, and a vivacious passage of soaring optimism. A broad statement of the hymn’s opening phrases serves as a grand coda.

The Swan of Tuonela (Op. 22) from Four Legends of Lemminkainen, Op. 22 (1893)

JEAN SIBELIUS

The Swan of Tuonela floats majestically, singing.” It was in 1817, when he was struggling to bring his Fifth Symphony into its final shape, that Sibelius first mentioned plans for two further such works, apparently conceived simultaneously in the euphoric rush following the end of World War I: “The VIIth symphony. Joy of life and vitality, with appassionato passages. In three movements the last a ‘Hellenic rondo.’ ... It looks as if I were to compose three symphonies at the same time.... With regard to VI and VII, the plans may be altered according to the development of musical ideas. As usual, I am a slave to my themes and submit to their demands.” He continued to tinker with the Fifth Symphony until the autumn of the following year, when he proclaimed it done. After the premiere of the Sixth Symphony, in February 1923 in Helsinki, he immediately went to Italy and began serious work on its successor. He completed the score on March 3, 1924. The piece that emerged, however, bore no resemblance to the three-movement work of the 1918 plan. It was instead a closely reasoned, single-movement composition. For Sibelius, this magnificent, rounded span of music took on nearly mystical significance. “The final form of one’s work,” he wrote, “is, indeed, dependent on powers that are stronger than oneself. Later on, one can substantiate this or that, but on the whole one is merely a tool. This wonderful logic let us call it God that governs a work of art is an irresistible power.... These symphonies of mine [Nos. 5, 6 and 7] are more in the nature of professions of faith than my other works.”

Symphony No. 7 in C major (in One Movement), Op. 105 (1923-1924)

JEAN SIBELIUS

24 minutes; woodwinds in pairs plus two piccolos, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings.

The Swan of Tuonela, Sibelius’ protagonist and one of the heroes of the epic, is a reckless adventurer, always getting into serious scrapes from which he escapes through brazen exploits or magic. A note in the score of The Swan of Tuonela describes the setting: “Tuonela, the land of death, the hell of Finnish mythology, is surrounded by a broad river with black waters and rapid currents, on which the Swan of Tuonela floats majestically, singing.” Lemminkainen, as one of the requirements for wooing a maiden of Pohjo, is charged with killing the sacred Swan. He fails, and is slain by an aged enemy. His body is cut to pieces by one of the guardians of Tuonela. Lemminkainen’s mother restores him to life by magic charms and salves. Sibelius’ tone poem depicts the legendary Swan and its darkly mysterious habitat. Though the music, like the river, flows continuously, Edward Downes suggested that its structure follows the ancient “Bar” form (A–A–B) used by the minstrel poets of forgotten days. The long melody of the Swan, introduced by the English horn, is played twice, the beginning of its repetition marked by the first entry of the horns. The third section starts with the pizzicato chords of the violins.
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There have been many attempts to explain the formal substance of the one-movement Seventh Symphony; some say it is really in three continuous movements, some five, some something else. Gerald Abraham’s is the most salient point, however: “The most remarkable aspect of Sibelius’ Seventh Symphony is that it is an organic symphony in one movement; not merely a long movement in which various sections correspond to slow movement, scherzo and so on, but a single indivisible organism.” The essence of this music, as it was for Beethoven in his last years, is in its becoming rather than in its achieving. The climaxes, the points of arrival, are only important as the logical consequence of what has preceded them, and can therefore be left almost as soon as they are reached so that the inexorable movement toward the next point of arrival the essential function of any art form that exists in and structures time may start again. The most fruitful way to hear such a work as the Seventh Symphony is to leave aside conventional formal expectations and allow the composer to be the guide through the experience by building tension, and releasing it: by creating transient obscurity to be resolved into crystalline clarity; by shaping time and emotions.

Concerto No. 1 for Piano and Orchestra in B-flat minor, Op. 23 (1874-1875)

PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840-1893)

32 minutes; woodwinds and trumpets in pairs, four horns, three trombones, timpani and strings.

At the end of 1874, Tchaikovsky began a piano concerto with the hope of having a success great enough to allow him to leave his irksome teaching post at the Moscow Conservatory. By late December, he had largely sketched out the work, and he sought the advice of Nikolai Rubinstein, Director of the Moscow Conservatory and an excellent pianist. Tchaikovsky reported the interview in a letter:

“On Christmas Eve 1874, Nikolai asked me to play the Concerto in a classroom of the Conservatory. We agreed to it. I played through the work. There burst forth from Rubinstein’s mouth a mighty torrent of words. It appeared that my Concerto was utterly worthless, absolutely unplayable; the piece as a whole was bad, trivial, vulgar.” Tchaikovsky was furious, and he stormed out of the classroom. He made only one change in the score: he obliterated the name of the original dedicatee, Nikolai Rubinstein and substituted that of the virtuoso pianist Hans von Bülow, who was performing Tchaikovsky’s piano pieces across Europe. Bülow gladly accepted the dedication and asked to program the premiere on his upcoming American tour. The Concerto created such a sensation when it was first heard, in Boston on October 25, 1875, that Bülow played it on 139 of his 172 concerts that season.

Tchaikovsky’s First Piano Concerto opens with the familiar theme of the introduction, a sweeping melody nobly sung by violins and cellos above thunderous chords from the piano. After a brief cadenza for the soloist, the theme which is not heard again anywhere in the Concerto is presented a second time in an even grander setting. Following a decrescendo and a pause, the piano presents the snapping main theme. (Tchaikovsky said that this curious first theme was inspired by a tune he heard sung by a blind beggar at a street fair.) Following a skillful discussion of the opening theme by piano and woodwinds, the clarinet announces the lyrical, bitter-sweet second theme. A smooth, complimentary phrase is played by the violins. This complementary phrase and the snapping motive from the main theme are combined in the movement’s impassioned development section. The recapitulation returns the themes of the exposition in altered settings. An energetic cadenza and a coda derived from the second theme bring the movement to a rousing close.

The simplicity of the second movement’s three-part structure (A–B–A) is augured by the purity of its opening a languid melody wrapped in the silvery tones of the solo flute, accompanied by quiet, plucked chords from the strings. The piano takes over the theme, provides it with rippling decorations, and passes it on to the cellos. The center of the movement is of very different character, with a quick tempo and a swift, ballectic melody. The languid theme and moonlit mood of the first section return to round out the movement.

The crisp rhythmic motive presented immediately at the beginning of the finale and then spun into a complete theme by the soloist dominates much of the last movement. In the theme’s vigorous full-orchestra guise, it has much of the spirit of a robust Cossack dance. To balance the impetuous vigor of this music, a contrasting theme is introduced, a romantic melody first entrusted to the violins. The dancing Cossacks repeatedly advance upon this bit of tenderness, which shows a hardy determination to dominate the movement. The two themes contend, but it is the flying Cossacks who bring the Concerto to an exhilarating finish.

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Hammerklavier Sonata and Bartók’s Piano Concerto No. 2.

The 2012-13 concert calendar featured Miss Filjak both at the Dubrovnik and the Kvarner Festival, in Palermo, Lausanne and Geneva, among others. Noteworthy recitals took her to Istanbul, Sala Verdi in Milan and The Phillips Collection in Washington D.C.

In the realm of chamber music, Martina is looking forward to performances with renowned musicians Radovan Vlatkovic and Kolja Blacher in Croatia and Germany. First encounters with conductors include Michael Schönwandt thus returning to the Zagreb Philharmonic; Roberto Paternostro and the Israel Chamber Orchestra; Florian Krumpöck and the Norddeutsche Philharmonie Rostock; Tito Muñoz and the Orchestre symphonique et lyrique de Nancy or Antony Hermus and the Anhaltische Philharmonie Dessau. A regular concerto soloist in the US, Martina Filjak will re-encounter Stefan Sanderling for performances with the Toledo and Illinois Symphony Orchestras and Sebastian Lang-Lessing with the San Antonio Symphony. As “artist in residence” she will make her debut at Ireland’s New Ross Piano Festival performing two recitals and Schumann’s Piano Concerto op. 54 alongside the RTÉ Concert Orchestra.

Martina’s extra-musical passions include nature [she is collaborating with the Office of the President of Republic of Croatia and the Ministry of Culture to publicise the need to protect the nearly extinct lynx] and education [she participates in Rhapsody in School, a project founded by Lars Vogt through which artists visit schools throughout Germany to give students access to classical music]. She also assists in fundraising for the ‘Martina Filjak Scholarship’ to help nurture the musical education of selected children in Cleveland, Ohio. Miss Filjak joyfully acknowledges the support of the Swiss Global artistic Foundation. Martina speaks seven languages. Fortunately, for an active performer, she loves to travel.