

Jean Sibelius, *Finlandia* Op. 26 (with chorus)
Symphony No. 3 in C major, Op. 52
Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47

When Finnish composer Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) was just three years old, his father died of typhus, and the financially ruined family turned to the support of relatives. While on extended visits with his grandparents, Sibelius's musical interests were sparked when he received piano lessons from a great aunt. But it was his Uncle Pehr, a trade merchant and amateur violinist who gave his nephew his first violin and provided the unwavering encouragement for Sibelius to continue his music studies.

In the 1800s Finland was not yet a sovereign nation, but instead a “grand duchy”—taken from Sweden—under Russian control. At first, the Grand Duchy of Finland had a great deal of political and cultural autonomy, but its russification became particularly intense in the 1880s when Czar Alexander III sought to firmly integrate it into the Russian Empire. Russian officials were appointed to key positions that took jurisdiction away from Finnish government administrators. An 1886 Language Decree aimed to increase the use of the Russian language in public education and official settings. And Russian authorities imposed strict censorship on the Finnish press.

19th-century Finland already had dueling languages spoken within its borders: Swedish, the language of the ruling elite, but spoken by only a minority of Finns, and Finnish, the language spoken by most working-class folks who didn't wield social power. Although Sibelius grew up in a Swedish-speaking family, he enrolled in a prominent Finnish-language secondary school. The more he learned about the culture and stories of his homeland, the more he embraced his Finnish identity and shared it through music.

Amid Finland's growing national identity along with increasing political tensions with Russia, Sibelius composed his tone poem *Finlandia* for a cultural rally and fundraiser known as the Finnish Press Celebrations of 1899. *Finlandia* begins with dramatic and turbulent low brass, representing the struggles and oppression faced by the Finnish people. The central theme, introduced in the second half of the work, is a majestic and affecting melody in the woodwinds. (This melody became so famous that in 1934, the American poet Lloyd Stone wrote lyrics for this melody, “This is my song.” The melody is also sung in the Christian hymn “Be still, my soul.”) By the end of the piece, the melody takes on a triumphant and inspiring character, one that reflects the Finnish aspirations and resilience.

From that point, Sibelius's international reputation was steadily growing, and in 1903 he turned his efforts towards composing a violin concerto. At that time audiences in central Europe had specific expectations about the concerto genre listening for motivic complexities brought forward in a flashy, virtuosic manner, in the tradition of Beethoven, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Bruch, and Tchaikovsky. In his violin concerto, Sibelius accomplishes all of that with his unmistakable brooding Nordic harmonies and orchestral colors.

The first movement begins with a soft murmuring in the strings and a melancholic, introspective theme from the soloist. As the work progresses, it transitions into greater and greater virtuosity for the violin: rapid scales and double stops add to the energy in this constantly building work. Although this movement uses a traditional sonata form, Sibelius steals a feature from Mendelssohn's playbook by placing the extended cadenza into the middle development section and not at the end.

The slower second movement, in contrast, is more warmly intimate and dreamlike. The violinist plays with poignancy atop a soft, delicate, and gently pulsing orchestra. The third and final movement uses a vigorous rhythmic drive to create a playful excitement. This movement is truly extravagant and showy, requiring the soloist to navigate breakneck-speed passages and complex fingerings from start to finish. The full orchestra joins in with the exuberance, making this one of the most exhilarating concerto codas in all the literature.

As Sibelius's international standing rose, so did his alcohol consumption to the point that his family and friends became increasingly concerned. In 1904, his loved ones intervened, and he agreed to move away from Helsinki—with its city life and temptations—into a rustic forest villa 25 miles to the north. It is in this setting where Sibelius composed his 3rd symphony—one that begins to turn away from the excesses of a late-romantic style of composition, and towards a leaner, more classically-oriented approach.

The first movement of the 3rd symphony has a clarity in its cheery character. Rather than designing a movement with dramatic contrasts, Sibelius's themes unfold organically. These melodic ideas are constantly explored with subtle and gradual variation and evolution. The second movement, in contrast, is serene and meditative unfolding with grace, balance, and simple lyricism.

Normally, symphonies have four movements with the last two movements being a scherzo and a finale. The third and final movement of Sibelius's 3rd symphony seems to function in both those roles — “the crystallization of thought from chaos,” as Sibelius described it. The movement begins with an array of playful melodic pieces and fragments in the first half but eventually ushering in a magisterial theme in the cellos and French horns. As the ending approaches, this newer theme takes the foreground in a glorious conclusion.

--David H. Johnson

Comments? Questions? Email me at david.johnson@gcsu.edu.