

Much of the Sibelius Violin Concerto's beauty comes from its eccentricity — while it has elements of a traditional Romantic concerto, Sibelius constantly asks the musicians to play in quirky, counterintuitive ways, and often pits the soloist and orchestra against each other.

BOB ANEMONE, NCS VIOLIN

Valse triste, Op. 44, No. 1

JEAN SIBELIUS

BORN December 8, 1865, in Hämeenlinna, Finland; died September 20, 1957, in Järvenpää, Finland

PREMIERE Composed 1903; first performance December 2, 1903, in Helsinki, conducted by the composer

OVERVIEW

Though Sibelius is universally recognized as the Finnish master of the symphony, tone poem, and concerto, he also produced a large amount of music in the more intimate forms, including the scores for 11 plays — the music to accompany a 1926 production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* was his last orchestral work. Early in 1903, Sibelius composed the music to underscore six scenes of a play by his brother-in-law, Arvid Järnefelt, titled *Kuolema* ("Death"). Among the music was a piece accompanying the scene in which Paavali, the central character, is seen at the bedside of his dying mother. She tells him that she has dreamed of attending a ball. Paavali falls asleep, and Death enters to claim his victim. The mother mistakes Death for her deceased husband and dances away with him. Paavali awakes to find her dead.

Sibelius gave little importance to this slight work, telling a biographer that “with all retouching [it] was finished in a week.” Two years later he arranged the music for solo piano and for chamber orchestra as *Valse triste* (“*Sad Waltz*”), and sold it outright to his publisher, Fazer & Westerlund, for a tiny fee. The piece became immediately popular as a salon bonbon. When the German firm of Breitkopf und Härtel acquired the rights to Sibelius’ music from Fazer & Westerlund late in 1905, they issued it in arrangements for all manner of performing forces, from solo flute to military band. The *Valse triste* was the music by which Sibelius first became known in America (Rachmaninoff had experienced a similar instant notoriety because of his little Prelude in C-sharp Minor a decade earlier), and he conducted it on his first concert in the United States, at the Norfolk (Connecticut) Music Festival on June 4, 1914. It was among the most ubiquitous melodies in the years just before World War I, but Sibelius, having sold away his rights, shared in none of its royalties.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Sibelius, like Brahms and Richard Strauss, was a great admirer of the waltzes of Johann Strauss. Sibelius’ biographer Cecil Gray claimed that he once spent an evening in a café with the composer and was surprised at the constant stream of Viennese waltzes dispensed by the establishment’s orchestra. When he asked his companion why they were playing in the staid, old style rather than in the more fashionable jazz idiom, Sibelius smiled, and said, “That is because I am here; they play it because they know I love it.” Gray saw the *Valse triste* as an “Hommage à Strauss,” and its success prompted Sibelius to add a *Valse romantique* to the incidental music for a 1911 revival of *Kuolema*. Like the Viennese examples on which it is modeled, the *Valse triste* comprises several continuous sections. It was the melancholy opening section that suggested the work’s name. This quiet, introspective paragraph is followed by a gossamer strain played with the utmost delicacy at the very tips of the string bows, a lyrical episode led by the

woodwinds, and a more vigorous section for the full ensemble before the wistful mood of the opening returns briefly to round out this lovely, haunting miniature.

INSTRUMENTATION

Flute, clarinet, two horns, timpani, strings

Violin Concerto in D Minor, Op. 47

JEAN SIBELIUS

PREMIERE Composed 1903; first performance February 8, 1904, in Helsinki, conducted by the composer, with Viktor Nováček as soloist

OVERVIEW

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 upon him during the day. There were, however, some disturbing personal worries threatening his musical fecundity.

In March 1902, just after the premiere of his Symphony No. 2, Sibelius developed a painful ear infection. Thoughts of the deafness of Beethoven and Smetana plagued him and he feared he might be losing his hearing. (He was 37 at the time.) In June, he began having trouble with his throat and he feared that his health was about to give way, but he nevertheless forged ahead with his Violin Concerto. The ailments continued to plague him until 1908, when a benign tumor was discovered. It took a dozen operations until it was successfully removed, but anxiety about its return stayed with him for years. (Sibelius, incidentally, 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.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The Violin Concerto's opening movement employs sonata form, 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 halflights 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-cadanza 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 sonatina-form finale launches into a robust dance whose theme the esteemed English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey thought could be "a polonaise for polar bears." The soloist's part accumulates difficulties as it goes, leading to an abrupt but resounding close.

INSTRUMENTATION

Solo violin, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, strings

Suite from *Pulcinella*

IGOR STRAVINSKY

BORN June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, near St. Petersburg, Russia; died April 6, 1971, in New York City

PREMIERE Composed 1919-1920, revised 1949; first performance May 15, 1920, in Paris, Ernest Ansermet conducting

OVERVIEW

The appearance of Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* in 1920 caused some consternation among the critics and public of Paris. The musical world had just recovered from the seismic shock of *Le Sacre du Printemps* ("The Rite of Spring") of 1913, the work that caused the most tempestuous opening-night riot in the annals of music. During the intervening years, Stravinsky had come to be viewed not so much as a wild-eyed anarchist as a highly individual aberration of the great and continuing tradition of Russian Romantic music: he employed folk-like themes; he orchestrated in the grand manner of Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov; and he wrote sharply etched rhythms that galvanized the *corps de ballet*, even if they played havoc with the toe-tapping proclivities of the patrons. The musical community allowed that, by 1920, they knew Stravinsky well enough to be able to predict the future of his career. They were wrong.

Stravinsky, though not uninterested in public opinion, was certainly not one to allow it to dictate the course of his music. He realized that *Le Sacre* had carried the techniques of the traditional Russian style about as far as they could go, and his artistic

sense impelled him to strike out in new directions. During the First World War, when the logistical problems of assembling a large symphony orchestra were frequently insurmountable, he started to compose for small chamber ensembles. *Les Noces*, *The Soldier's Tale* and the *Ragtime for Eleven Instruments* date from that time. Those works were not well known in Paris, however, and when *Pulcinella* appeared there was general surprise at what many perceived to be a stylistic about-face by Stravinsky. Gone were the massive orchestras of the early ballets, the hectic rhythmic patterns, the riveting dissonances. In their place, Stravinsky offered a ballet, scored for small orchestra with three solo voices, whose melodies, sonority and ethos were built on the Baroque models of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, a musical meteor who flashed briefly across the Italian artistic firmament during the early years of the 18th century (1710-1736) and created several important instrumental and operatic pieces that laid the foundations of the Classical style. Once the novelty had passed from *Pulcinella*, however, the public was delighted with the new piece, and Stravinsky reaped much approval for lighting out on a different path, one carefully attuned to the time. The ballet became a success, and its style led the way to a new attitude about the relationship between 20th-century music and that of earlier eras, a trend that became known as "Neo-Classicism."

The idea for *Pulcinella* originated with Serge Diaghilev, the legendary impresario of the Ballets Russe, who had also engaged Léonide Massine to choreograph the piece and devise the scenario and an appropriate text for the three vocal soloists, and Pablo Picasso to do the decor and costumes. For the work's musical substance, Diaghilev suggested the music of Pergolesi to Stravinsky. The composer, perhaps with Diaghilev's help (Stravinsky's writings are unclear on this matter), selected from Pergolesi's works several movements from the trio sonatas and arias from two operas. To these he added a generous gaggle of musical bits by other composers. In general, he kept the bass lines and melodies of his models intact, but added to them his own spicy harmonies and invigorating rhythmic fillips, and then illuminated the whole piece with a brilliant,

translucent orchestration. Stravinsky's role in *Pulcinella*, however, was far more than that of simply transcriber or arranger. He not only created a cogent work of art from a wide variety of previously unrelated pieces, but he also gave a new perspective to both his own and Pergolesi's music. "*Pulcinella*," he recalled in *Dialogues and a Diary*, "was my discovery of the past — but it was a look in the mirror, too." With this music, Stravinsky found a manner in which to apply earlier styles and techniques to his own compositional needs, a discovery that was to provide the inspiration for his works for the next thirty years. "Art about art" is American composer and critic Eric Salzman's perfect phrase describing the essence of Stravinsky's neo-classical aesthetic during the ensuing three decades.

The plot of Stravinsky's ballet *Pulcinella* was based on an 18th-century manuscript of *commedia dell'arte* plays discovered in Naples. The composer provided the following synopsis: "All the local girls are in love with Pulcinella; but the young men to whom they are betrothed are mad with jealousy and plot to kill him. The minute they think they have succeeded, they borrow costumes resembling Pulcinella's to present themselves to their sweethearts in disguise. But Pulcinella — cunning fellow! — has already changed places with a double, who pretends to succumb to their blows. The real Pulcinella, disguised as a magician, now resuscitates his double. At the very moment when the young men, thinking they are rid of their rival, come to claim their sweethearts, Pulcinella appears and arranges all the marriages. He himself weds Pimpinella, receiving the blessing of his double, who in his turn has assumed the magician's mantle."

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The movements of the suite serve as a précis of the ballet's music and story. The exuberant *Sinfonia* (Overture) is based on the opening movement of Pergolesi's Trio Sonata No. 1 in G Major. The movements that follow accompany the entrances of the

Neapolitan girls who try to attract Pulcinella's attention with their dances. (The *Serenata* derives from a pastorale in Act I of Pergolesi's opera *Flaminio*; the *Scherzino* is borrowed from a sonata by the Venetian violinist and composer Domenico Gallo.) The *Tarantella* (from the fourth movement of Fortunato Chelleri's Concertino No. 6 in B-flat Major) portrays the confusion when Pulcinella is apparently restored to life. The movements that close the suite accompany the events from the point when the young men claim their sweethearts until the end of the ballet. The *Toccata* and *Gavotta con due variazioni* are based on anonymous harpsichord pieces; the *Vivo* on Pergolesi's Cello Sonata in F Major; the *Minuetto* on a canzone from his comic opera *Lo frate 'nnamorato*; and the finale on a trio sonata by Gallo.

INSTRUMENTATION

Piccolo, two flutes, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, trombone, tuba, strings

Suite from *The Firebird*

IGOR STRAVINSKY

PREMIERE Composed 1909-1910, revised 1919; first performance June 25, 1910, in Paris, Gabriel Pierné conducting

OVERVIEW

Fireworks. There could not have been a more appropriate title for the work that launched the meteoric career of Igor Stravinsky. He wrote that glittering orchestral miniature in 1908, while still under the tutelage of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and it shows all the dazzling instrumental technique that the student had acquired from his teacher. Though the reception of *Fireworks* was cool when it was first performed at the Siloti Concerts in St. Petersburg on February 6, 1909, there was one member of the

audience who listened with heightened interest. Serge Diaghilev was forming his Ballets Russes company at just that time, and he recognized in Stravinsky a talent to be watched. He approached the 27-year-old composer and requested orchestral transcriptions of short pieces by Chopin and Grieg that would be used in the first Parisian season of the Ballets Russes. Stravinsky did his work well and on time.

During that same winter, plans were beginning to stir in the creative wing of the Ballets Russes for a Russian folk ballet — something filled with legend and magic and fantasy. The composer Nikolai Tcherepnin was then associated with the Ballets Russes, and it was assumed he would compose the music for a plot derived from several traditional Russian sources. However, Tcherepnin was given to inexplicable changes of mood and he was losing interest in ballet at the time, so he withdrew from the project. Diaghilev then wrote to his old harmony professor, Anatoly Liadov, and asked him to consider taking on the task, informing him that the date for the premiere of the new work was firmly set for less than a year away. After too many weeks with no word from the dilatory composer, Diaghilev paid him a visit, and was greeted with Liadov's report on his progress: "It won't be long now," Diaghilev was told. "It's well on its way. I have just today bought the manuscript paper." Realizing that *The Firebird* would never get off the ground at such a rate, Diaghilev inquired whether Stravinsky had any interest in taking over for Liadov. Though involved in another project (he had just completed the first act of the opera *The Nightingale*), he was eager to work with the wonderful talent that had assembled under Diaghilev's banner, and he agreed. After some delicate negotiations with Liadov, Stravinsky was officially awarded the commission in December, though his eagerness was so great that he had begun composing the music a month earlier.

It is well that Stravinsky had a head start, because he had less than six months to complete the score. In his *Chronicles*, he wrote, "Although alarmed by the fact that this was a commission with a fixed date, and afraid that I should fail to complete the work in

time — I was still unaware of my own capabilities — I accepted the order. It was highly flattering to me to be chosen from among musicians of my generation, and to be allowed to collaborate in so important an enterprise side by side with personages who were generally recognized as masters in their own spheres.” It soon became clear that Stravinsky belonged to that company of masters. During one rehearsal, Diaghilev whispered into the ear of the prima ballerina, Tamara Karsavina, “Mark him well. He is a man on the eve of celebrity.” Diaghilev was as good a prophet as an impresario. *The Firebird*, which Stravinsky regarded as his first mature composition, was a stunning success at its premiere. With this score, and the epochal *Petrushka* of the following year and *The Rite of Spring* of 1913, Stravinsky went in just five short years from an obscure student composer in Russia to one of the most famous musicians in the world. With somewhat uncharacteristic understatement, he said, “*The Firebird* radically altered my life.”

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The story deals with the glittering Firebird and the evil ogre Kastchei, who captures maidens and turns men to stone if they enter his domain. Kastchei is immortal as long as his soul, which is preserved in the form of an egg in a casket, remains intact. The plot shows how Prince Ivan wanders into Kastchei’s garden in pursuit of the Firebird; he captures it and exacts a feather before letting it go. Ivan meets a group of Kastchei’s captive maidens and falls in love with one of them. The princesses return to Kastchei’s palace. Ivan breaks open the gates to follow them, but he is captured by the ogre’s guardian monsters. He waves the magic feather and the Firebird reappears to smash Kastchei’s vital egg; the ogre expires. All the captives are freed and Ivan and his Tsarevna are wed.

Stravinsky drew three concert suites from *The Firebird*. The 1919 suite includes six scenes from the complete score. The first two, Introduction and The Dance of the

Firebird, accompany the appearance of the magical creature. The introduction includes two important musical motifs: the lugubrious low strings and trombones depicting the sinister atmosphere of Kashchei's court in a winding melody outlining tritones; and the fluttering chirps of the Firebird portrayed by snapping woodwind figures. The brilliant Dance that follows without interruption is characterized by quivering trills and scintillating little rockets of tone color exploding in every section of the orchestra. The Dance of the Princesses uses the rhythm and style of an ancient Russian dance called the *Khorovod*. Its simple, plaintive theme is delicately scored to accompany the entrance of the maidens, while the hero looks on enraptured from the cover of a bush. The *Infernal Dance of King Kastchei* is the most modern portion of the score. Its feverish rhythmic energy, tritone-based themes, daring instrumental procedures, and thunderclap ferocity all look forward to *The Rite of Spring*. This is the music depicting the madness engendered by the appearance of the Firebird at Kastchei's court after the revelation to Ivan of the evil ogre's vulnerability.

The haunting *Berceuse* is heard when the thirteenth princess, the one of whom Ivan is enamored, succumbs to a sleep-charm which saves her from the terrible King while Ivan destroys Kastchei's malevolent power. The bassoon begins the dolorous strain and passes it to the oboe before it is caught up by the muted strings. The *Berceuse* is connected to the finale by one of the most wondrous passages in all of Stravinsky's works. Tremolo strings give out a series of glistening harmonies, as though the whole world were holding its breath for the climax of the story — the defeat of evil; the triumph of good. The finale, initiated by the solo horn, confirms the life-force that had been threatened by Kashchei. It builds and soars, rising higher and broader and more confidently through the orchestra. Three final gestures bring the suite to an unforgettable close: majestic chords in uneven meters hurled forth by the brass; these same harmonies played again, but twice as slowly and more richly scored; and, finally, a heroic peroration by the brass over a sustained string tremolo.

INSTRUMENTATION

Piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, piano, celeste, strings

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