

Jean Sibelius

“The Bard,” Tone poem, Opus 64

JEAN (JOHAN JULIUS CHRISTIAN) SIBELIUS was born at Hämeenlinna (Tavestehus in Swedish), Finland, on December 8, 1865, and died at Järvenpää, near Helsingfors (Helsinki), on September 20, 1957. He took the gallicized form of his first name in emulation of an uncle. Sibelius composed his tone poem “The Bard” in 1913, working on it throughout the month of March and then himself leading the first performance on March 27, 1913, in Helsinki with the Philharmonic Society. Dissatisfied with that performance, he considered expanding the work into two or three parts (the publisher Breitkopf having commented that it sounded more like the start of a suite than an independent piece), but decided that summer to keep it as a single movement. Sibelius led a revised version of “The Bard” in Helsinki on January 9, 1916, again with the Philharmonic Society.

THE SCORE OF “THE BARD” calls for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, bass drum, tam-tam, harp, and strings. The duration of the piece is about seven minutes.

Sibelius observed in 1904, around the time of his Third Symphony, that he “was not a literary musician: for me, music begins where words leave off” and that also for him, “a symphony should be music first and last.” But it remains true nevertheless that Sibelius’s particular musical sensibility informs equally both his symphonies and his tone poems: we recognize in his symphonies thematic contours and gestures, use of tonality and modality, and techniques of instrumentation that suggest the tone poems, and vice versa, stamping the composer’s musical language as specifically and individually Sibelian whether intended to suggest a story or not. Sibelius composed his First Symphony in 1899, his last—his Seventh—in 1924. The earliest of his tone poems, *En Saga*, dates from 1892, the last, *Tapiola*, from 1926. After *Tapiola*—Sibelius’s only important work to follow the Seventh Symphony—came what was, with regard to musical production, effectively a thirty-year silence lasting until his death, the so-called “silence from Järvenpää,” the small country village northeast of Helsinki where he lived from 1904. Whatever sketches may have existed for an Eighth Symphony were destroyed; seemingly he had nothing more to say in the realm of symphonic music.

Between those beginning and end points came, among many other things, the four tone poems brought together in 1896 as the *Lemminkäinen Suite* (including *The Swan of Tuonela*, with its solo English horn evoking the animal’s languid course); *Finlandia* (1900, based on music written for an 1899 press pageant celebrating Finnish history and culture), and the rarely heard (in fact barely known) tone poems *The Dryad* (1910) and *The Bard* (1913). Often—as was the case for *Kullervo* (a seventy-minute work for soloists, male chorus, and orchestra, which put the twenty-six-year-old composer on the map, at least in Finland, when it was premiered in April 1892), the *Lemminkäinen Suite*, *Luonnotar* (1912, an extraordinary tone poem for soprano and orchestra based on a creation myth), and *Tapiola*—Sibelius took inspiration from the so-called “Finnish national epic,” the *Kalevala*, a conflation of Finnish folk tales, lyrics, narrative, and magic charms actually compiled in 1835 after extensive field research by Elias Lönnrot and then expanded by Lönnrot and David Europaeus fourteen years later to twice its original length.

In fact, Sibelius’s affinity for his country’s folklore and geography was apparent in his music from the start: his earliest piece, for violin and cello pizzicato, was called *Waterdrops*. Years later, as he observed in his diaries, the beauties of the land near his country estate helped distract him from the atrocities of the civil war that ravaged Finland in the final phase of its struggle against Russia at the close of World War I. Bengt de Torne, one of Sibelius’s biographers, recalled that

One day I mentioned the impression which always takes hold of me when returning to Finland across the Baltic, the first forebodings of our country being given us by low, reddish granite rocks emerging from the pale blue sea, solitary islands of a hard, archaic beauty....I concluded by saying that this landscape many centuries ago was the cradle of the Vikings. “Yes,” Sibelius answered eagerly, and his eyes flashed, “and when we see those granite rocks we know why we are able to treat the orchestra as we do!”

The Bard dates from an extended and difficult time during which the composer’s life was shadowed by the threat of cancer; he underwent fourteen major operations before a tumor was finally located and removed from his throat. Erik Tawaststjerna, in his definitive biography of the composer, refers to this as Sibelius’s “dark period,” a period also encompassing such works as the Opus 55 symphonic poem *Night Ride and Sunrise* (1908; the BSO’s performances last month were its first of that piece since 1917), the Opus 56 string quartet *Voces Intimae* (1909), the

Opus 59 orchestral funeral march *In Memoriam* (also 1909), the Fourth Symphony (1911, the starkest of his works in that genre), and *Luonnotar* (1912).

According to Tawaststjerna, the most Sibelius ever revealed as to any inspiration for *The Bard* was to say that it “refers to a skald [bard] of the Ancient Scandinavian world and is not drawn from the *Kalevala*.” And late in life, Sibelius denied that *The Bard* had any connection to a poem of the same name by the Finnish national poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804-1877). On the other hand, as Tawaststjerna observes, Sibelius always kept Runeberg’s poems readily at hand, so could it have been only coincidence that just a few months after completing his tone poem, Sibelius wrote a short piano piece called *To Longing*—the title also of a Runeberg poem in volume I of the poet’s collected works (with the title printed in bold) within a page or so after Runeberg’s *The Bard*? In any event, the source of Sibelius’s inspiration remains incidental. This somber, captivating, deeply reflective piece is a masterly achievement. The music—with its spare yet atmospheric textures frequently enriched by divided violas and cellos; its generally restrained dynamic (note the preponderance of *pp* and *ppp* in the score); its bardic solo harp (an analogue to *The Swan of Tuonela*’s English horn) so quietly evocative of Nordic folklore and legend; and its confiding turn to major at the very end—surely tells us all we need to know.

Marc Mandel

THE FIRST MAJOR AMERICAN ORCHESTRA to perform “*The Bard*” was apparently the *Detroit Symphony* under Sixten Ehrling, on March 30, 1967—at least some indication of how infrequently the piece is played—though the program book on that occasion did not claim an American premiere.

THE ONLY PREVIOUS BOSTON SYMPHONY PERFORMANCES of “*The Bard*” were led by Robert Spano in April 2006.