



Ah, Wilderness

By R. J. Stove

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Sibelius, by Andrew Barnett (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007)

Music lovers today have certain consolations not available three decades ago, even if we do have to share the planet with Britney Spears and 50 Cent. For one thing, we need no longer feel remotely apologetic about defending four late-Romantic giants: Sibelius, Elgar, Puccini, and Rachmaninoff. All four, and Sibelius in particular, have inspired during recent years quantities of serious research that even in the early 1970s would have been unimaginable. Given this newfound critical respect, the abrupt dismissals that Sibelius once inspired from fashion-conscious (and less fashion-conscious but still squeamish) pundits in America, above all, make in retrospect for a surreal experience. Paul Henry Lang, the Hungarian-born Columbia University professor, made precisely one reference to Sibelius (and that decidedly hostile) in the 1,107 pages of his almost unbelievably erudite 1941 survey *Music in Western Civilization*. A year earlier, and inhabiting a far lower intellectual level than Lang occupied, Virgil Thomson – the *New York Herald Tribune* journalist and apparatchik – found himself provoked by Sibelius’s Second Symphony into *argumentum ad verecundiam* mode:

Twenty years’ residence on the European continent has largely spared me Sibelius ... vulgar, self-indulgent, and provincial beyond all description. I realize that there are sincere Sibelius-lovers in the world, though I must say I’ve never met one among educated professional musicians.

Equally, we should not overlook the sustained, frequently frenzied, wrath to which Sibelius moved progressive spirits in Central Europe: notably Schoenberg disciples Rene Leibowitz (author of a two-page essay entitled *Sibelius: Le Plus Mauvais*

Compositeur du Monde) and T. W. Adorno (who, when not engaged in the higher reaches of anti-family junk science, fancied himself as a musicologist and composer). In his characteristically shrill and uncouth idiolect, Adorno denounced Sibelius as representing “Aunt Jemima’s ready-mix for pancakes extended to the field of music.” Not only did Adorno regard as a personal affront Sibelius’s absence of interest in Schoenbergian methods, but he suffered from the widespread and simple-minded belief that any preoccupation – like Sibelius’s own – with wilderness and with folk legends constitutes unassailable evidence of Nazi affinities.

Today it is hard to credit such pamphleteering as Adorno’s, Leibowitz’s, and Thomson’s with any significance except the historical and the psychiatric, so inextricable is it from Marxist-modernist worldviews that are themselves museum-pieces. Meanwhile, quietly, gradually, and diligently, genuine scholars have been enlarging our comprehension of Sibelius’s musical mind. The late Finnish critic Erik Tawaststjerna made his life’s work the production of a three-volume Sibelius biography; British critic Robert Layton not only translated Tawaststjerna’s *magnum opus* into English but also provided – and repeatedly revised – his own, indispensable, single-volume guide to Sibelius’s life and art. Now comes Andrew Barnett’s book, which occupies the philological end of the analytic spectrum. Barnett, benefiting from the Sibelius-related discoveries announced by cataloguer Fabian Dahlstrom as recently as 2003, does what Layton never set out to do: he discusses everything Sibelius wrote, concentrating in particular on the copious juvenilia (much of it for chamber ensembles) that Sibelius himself suppressed. Because, to put it politely, not all of Sibelius’s published juvenilia bears the stamp of greatness, the temptation is to disparage the unpublished material as justly neglected. Unfortunately for this neat conclusion, Sibelius demonstrated several times his own lack of judgment in deciding what music he should let out of his study and what he should not. After all, he permitted one of his finest early pieces, the choral symphony *Kullervo*, to be performed exactly once before he withdrew it. Only in 1958, a year after his death, was *Kullervo* ever heard again. After that, its innate excellence – and its right to a place alongside his seven canonical symphonies – remained unquestionable.

At times Barnett’s commentary suggests a slightly desperate roll call of trivia he would rather ignore: “It is hard to summon up much enthusiasm for the *Suite in A Major*”; “The *Prelude* for brass septet ... is perhaps best seen as an experiment”; “a pallid *Melodie* for piano [with] ... a rather half-hearted fanfare-like idea”; “an attractive enough but by no means a distinctive work”; and so forth. More often than not, though, Barnett is both enthusiastic about the forgotten efforts he has uncovered and the cause of enthusiasm about them in his readers. He mentions a *Piano Trio*, from its creator’s twenty-second year (1887), which sounds enticing enough for comprehensive revival. Since the Swedish record company BIS is steadily working its way toward a complete Sibelius edition, we shall duly be able to test Barnett’s reportage for ourselves. Until then, the musical examples in Barnett’s appendix cannot fail to be useful.

Much of Sibelius's method can be summed up in a solitary anecdote. During his old age, his numerous visitors included British recording producer Walter Legge, who asked whether Sibelius's *Sixth Symphony* – that post-apocalyptic pastoral – had been influenced by Monteverdi and Palestrina. There immediately fell an embarrassed silence, in which the composer's eyes “froze harder than ever,” and he stalked out to the garden. Legge apologized for having made so indiscreet an enquiry, whereupon the following dialogue ensued:

LEGGÉ: Forgive me – I promise not to ask such a question again.

SIBELIUS: If you want to pee, do it here; it's better than inside sanitation in this part of Finland.

This response epitomizes Sibelius's disposition: the terseness, the downrightness, the indifference to surface polish, the gnomic unpredictability. One feature of his idiom which continues to perturb, despite the half-century that has elapsed since his passing, is his disdain for conventional conclusions. Most of his masterpieces do not end so much as stop. Still, such is his gift for timing that they never sound unfinished. Nor would we have them cease in any other manner: a Sibelius without brusquerie would not be Sibelius at all.

In recounting the broad outlines of Sibelius's career, Barnett has no astonishing revelations. Sibelius's financial ineptitude has long been known: he sold for a pittance the rights to his greatest popular hit, *Valse Triste* (much as Rachmaninoff sold for a pittance the rights to *his* greatest popular hit, the *Prelude in C Sharp Minor*). Barnett quotes a poignant letter from the composer's wife, attempting in her husband's absence to fight off creditors: “We have here a whole collection of bills and demands and my head is simply spinning ... I think about you all the time and I don't have the will to stop myself crying.” Likewise openly admitted has been Sibelius's drinking problem, a condition quite beyond the normal alcoholic intake that Nature allots to Finns. (After one binge at Gothenburg, Sweden, in 1923, he managed to stagger up to the conductor's rostrum on time; but in his soused state, he mistook the concert for a rehearsal, and therefore brought the performance to a halt.) Yet whatever connection Sibelius's boozing had with his ultimate inactivity must be conjectural. That inactivity itself, although famous, was hardly uninterrupted. While Sibelius published precious little new music in his last thirty years – years which Barnett deals with in a mere twenty-seven pages – he revised his older music till a few weeks before the end; and for long he hoped against hope that his artistic conscience would allow him to release his long-awaited *Eighth Symphony*. Sadly, it never did. “How tremendously tragic,” he confided to his diary when a mere fifty-nine, “is the fate of an aging composer. The work doesn't flow as fast as before.” Self-criticism, almost always excessive in his case, eventually metastasized into outright creative paralysis. He burned the symphony's entire manuscript during World War II. Did he subsequently regret doing this? Possibly, since his diaries indicate something of a bipolar temperament from his youth onward. On consecutive days in August 1896 he wrote “my life often feels empty” and “Life feels so rich again.” At any rate, the deed was done, and we are forced to guess at what musical treasures the flames consumed.

Along with Sibelius's profound doubts in major matters went a certain harmless vanity in minor matters derived in part from his small size. Though camera-shy, he nevertheless somewhat enjoyed giving the impression in photographs – like another vertically challenged twentieth-century artist-patriot, Yukio Mishima – of awesome physical bulk. He found “Jean,” the Frenchified version of his Christian name, more congenial than the Finnish “Janne” of his baptism. He had periodic delusions of aristocratic lineage, and on occasion he could resemble Evelyn Waugh: “Flirting with the workers,” he noted in the 1890s, “[is] worse than currying favor with the upper class. One has to crush so much of one's own personality.” Amid the Bolshevik-engendered Finnish civil strife of 1918, he endured such malnourishment that he lost twenty kilograms over two months. Russian governments considered him blatantly subversive: *Finlandia*, the most renowned of his earlier compositions, had the rare distinction of being banned twice, first by Czar Nicholas II's regime, and again (in 1939-40) by Stalin's. With Sibelius's eightieth birthday in 1945, his pre-eminence among Finns lay beyond dispute and was acknowledged by Finnish presidents and prime ministers, who made pilgrimages to his home, proffered wreaths at his funeral, and who now and then permitted his portrait to appear in his lifetime upon postage stamps. But no amount of adulation could remove his tendencies to black despair.

If there are sadder, bleaker utterances in orchestral music than Sibelius's quintessential expressions of melancholy – *The Swan of Tuonela*, the *Fourth* and *Sixth Symphonies*, the *Violin Concerto's* opening movement – they cannot readily be identified. (*Tuonela* is, in Finnish folklore, hell: leave it to Scandinavians to envisage hell as freezing.) Joy, when it does occur in Sibelius's output – as in the *Fifth Symphony's* finale – seems inseparable from laborious heroism. It never belongs to the realm of what Gustav Hoist called “domestic emotions.” Sibelius himself described his style as “pure cold water,” and with the passing of years it became colder and colder, less and less conventionally humane. His last tone poem, *Tapiola* (Tapio being Finnish mythology's forest god), is a seventeen-minute hymn to the most desolate pantheism. For its literary equivalent, one must go to Robert Frost's febrile eschatological rumination, “Fire and Ice” (dating from 1920, only six years prior to Sibelius's score), which observes that “for destruction” the power of ice is as great as fire “and would suffice.”

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