

Judge Dennis Davis | Jean Sibelius and the Influence of National Identity in His Music

– Good evening to everybody, or good afternoon, as the case may be. My topic tonight essentially deals with the question of Sibelius, Jean Sibelius, who, to a large degree, I suppose one could call a composer who's often been interpreted as being a nationalist composer and who reflected very much the national struggles of Finland, and understand that you would've had a lecture from William Tyler this afternoon or early evening dealing with Finland, and in a sense, Sibelius plugs into that, but I wanted to start a little in a slightly odd fashion, you know, almost as an overture to my lecture because I suppose the events of the last week as a result of the death of Queen Elizabeth II have really, in a sense, thrown out, I suspect, the idea of nationalism at its best and the unification of a national identity drawing people from all walks of life into a common purpose, and, of course, I was supposed to have been giving a lecture the very night that Queen Elizabeth, or interviewed, interviewing an author about Isaiah Berlin was unable to do so, so in a way, you may ask why am I telling you all of this? Because I came across on Friday, somebody sent to me a recording of "Shalom Aleikhem." That is the prayer that we sing at our houses on the Friday night of Shabbas in which in tradition is that we are accompanied by two angels who come home with us, and if the table is laid and all is well, the good angel will bless us, and the contrary might occur if it isn't the case, and I wanted to play this. It is by a cantor, Azi Schwartz, who I've spoken about many times, and we'll be dealing with him next week when we talk about the liturgy, and I thought that you may well be interested in what I thought was a very moving way in which you could use Yiddishkeit, if you wish, to kind of commemorate the life of Elizabeth II, so please listen to this, and I'd be interested what you think. Some of you might have heard this already, but it seems beautiful, and therefore to be shared. Let's clip one please.

(An audio clip of the song "God Save the Queen" sung by Azi Schwartz plays)

Well, see, somebody didn't really like it. I thought it was absolutely beautiful. There we are, from the Park Avenue Synagogue, Azi Schwartz.

Now, let us get onto Sibelius. What do you do about a composer, born in 1867, 1865, sorry, dies in 1957, composes seven symphonies, a magnificent violin concerto, and other works, and for the last 30 years of his life, nothing comes up, nothing. No contribution of any kind to music, and Sibelius, therefore, is a very interesting character for all sorts of reasons in this regard because if you look at his life, it oscillated between grandiosity and self-loathing. Sometimes he believed he was in direct communication with God. "For an instant, God opened his door," he wrote in a letter, "and his

orchestra plays the Fifth Symphony," but in 1927, by contrast, when he was 61 years old, he wrote, "Isolation and loneliness "are driving me to despair. "In order to survive, I have to have alcohol. "I'm abused, alone, and all my real friends are dead. "My prestige here at present is rock bottom. "Impossible to work. If only there was a way out." In fact, we know that on his desk for many years, and I'll come back to that, was the Fourth Symphony, sorry, the Eighth Symphony, the one he never completed, and it is particularly interesting that his wife writes about, in the 1940s quote, "My husband collected a number of manuscripts "in a laundry basket "and burnt them on the open fire in the dining room. "Parts of the 'Karelia Suite,'" I'll come back to that, "were destroyed. "I later saw remains of the pages which had been torn out "and many other things. "I did not have the strength to be present "and left the room. "I therefore do not know what he threw onto the fire, "but after that, my husband became calmer "and gradually lighter in mood," so there's a real tragedy to a man who required alcohol for, as it were, to keep going and who promised an Eighth Symphony, never produced it, and ultimately, for literally 30 years of his life, no music emerged from him, which makes him, not necessarily, I should say, unique. It does seem to me that there are other composers who you could put broadly in that category, not necessarily completely. Elgar died in '34, failed to finish another large-scale work after the great Cello Concerto of 1918. Rachmaninoff, who was supposed to be the appointed heir for Tchaikovsky, produced only five works from 1917 until his death in '43, but this is a fairly unique category, that is, Sibelius.

Now, Sibelius's first work was, in fact, based on the national legends of Finland, which are contained in the Kalevala, a poetic epic, which was compiled in 1835 and which he turned into an 80-minute symphonic drama called "Kullervo," which I've just spoken about. That got him known, but what clearly got him really known was the completion of his first two symphonies in 1899 and 1902, and what is particularly important, of course, was then "Finlandia," and that really got Sibelius an enormous amount of fame, and let's just dwell on "Finlandia," and then let's play it because the music must speak for itself. Basically, what had happened was that by, as you probably have learned in the earlier lecture, by 1899, there was massive political tension because the Russian hold on Finland was growing tighter, and effectively, there was an extraordinary resistance because of Nicholas II's various initiatives, which placed more and more control of Finnish life under Russian control, and even absorbing the Finns into the Russian army, and so what came about was Sibelius composing what is nothing more than about a eight- or nine-minute piece, but this, this was the piece which many people regarded as the national anthem, the way in which Finns could articulate their national identity in protest against Russian, Russian occupation, to a large degree, Russian interference, and so its success was just extraordinary. It made Sibelius effectively the most popular man in the whole of Finland, and it seems to me quite worthwhile now, if I may, if we just

listen to the eight minutes, and then I can say a little bit about the music, but it's eight minutes. It's extraordinarily stirring. I'm sure many of you've heard it before, but you have to listen to it as a, this particular piece, almost in the same way that Tchaikovsky composed the "Marche Slave." Ironically, in that case, basically heralding the great bravery and nationalism of Russia against France. Here, it's the other way around. It's the Finnish story against Russian encroachment. Here we have the second clip, if I could have it, and the "Finlandia."

(An audio clip of the symphony "Finlandia" composed in 1899 by Sibelius plays)

Could you stop the clip? Thanks. I mean, it doesn't do justice to the piece, but you get the idea. Sorry, it wasn't... It was too crackly, but nonetheless, I do apologise for that, but you get the picture, and the interesting thing was, I mean, this rousing piece of music which made Sibelius terribly famous. He, of course, was extremely irritated, in the same way that Ravel was about "Bolero," that they kept on being linked only with "Finlandia" rather than with music which, in fact, was far superior, and so I want, obviously, in one lecture, it's impossible to traverse all of the music of Sibelius, and I've had to be particularly selective, so a particularly good link to "Finlandia" is Symphony No. 2, and there are a number of reasons for that, which I shall explore with you, but let me just say that one of the interesting things, as you listen to this music, consider what Sibelius said about music. "Music," he says, "is, for me, "like a beautiful mosaic which God has put together. "He takes all the pieces in his hand, "throws them into the world, "and we have to recreate the picture from the pieces." We have to recreate the picture from the pieces. I want you to hold onto that thought for a moment. It is particularly interesting that in a famous debate which I've alluded to when I lectured on Gustav Mahler, the debate between Mahler and Sibelius, where Sibelius spoke about the importance of the profound logic and the interconnection between the motifs, and Mahler spoke about a symphony having to encompass the world. Very different philosophical views here about how a symphony should be composed. Now, the Second Symphony, which, in many ways, is heralded as a very foundational moment of, again, of Finnish nationalism, doesn't start in Finland, but in Italy. He was actually at the seaside town of Rapallo in Italy, and what he wanted to do was actually to write a four-piece, started one, but then a four-piece set of tone poems all based on the Don Juan narrative because he had seen a production of Mozart's "Don Giovanni," which influenced him hugely, and so he started to compose this, but when he went back to Finland, he decided to change his mind, and therefore, to create not so much a "Don Juan" set of tone poems, but one particular symphony.

Now, it's really interesting when we look at this particular symphony because, firstly, I think it does illustrate the difference between a

Mahlerian approach to symphonies, as I've indicated, and the approach which Sibelius took, but there is something else about the symphony which is particularly interesting because it was regarded, it was regarded by many as the ultimate, as the ultimate form of national symphony. In other words, a symphony which, to a large degree, replicated, in greater and more sophisticated mode, that which you could find in the "Finlandia." In other words, the point being that some people regarded this symphony as a complete protest against the incursions by Russia, an entirely, what's the word I'm looking for? An entirely nationalistic enterprise. Curiously, and this is what is so interesting, curiously, Sibelius himself said, "No, no, no. "This symphony has no extramusical narrative. "It's not about that." He said, "A symphony's not just a composition "in the ordinary sense of the word. "It's more of a confession at a given stage of life." For him, he regarded this particular symphony as a symphony which literally was articulating his own psychological thinking. Whereas, on the other hand, the great Finnish conductor Robert Kajanus, who was his mentor, said about this that this symphony, particularly the Andante of the symphony, "Strikes one as the most brokenhearted protest "against all of the injustice "that threatens at the present time." That is exactly what I suspect, sorry, what William would've spoken to you about earlier, so the symphony, you know, this is so interesting. A composer sets a symphony into the world, and people look at it very differently. He didn't think there was extramusical connotations. His mentor, and someone who conducted it, thought that this was a profound protest against Russia, and that the last part of the symphony illustrates that particularly, and we're going to listen to the last part of the symphony, but before we do that, I want to talk a little about the first movement because I want to play you some of the opening of the first movement. It's absolutely fascinating for a series of reasons which I'd like you to observe. In the first place, the opening is a three-note stepwise ascending motif. Now, I've spoken about four notes starting a symphony when I discussed with you Beethoven's Fifth. Here, observe the three-note stepwise ascending motif, which actually comes back over and over again, so that's the first part I'd like you to bear in mind. What I'd also like you to bear in mind, as we listen just to the first few minutes, is precisely, again, what I've already said. When Sibelius says, "If God had thrown down the pieces of a mosaic "for heaven's floor, "God had thrown down the pieces of a mosaic "for heaven's floor, "and asked me to put them together," so in the first movement, it is almost, there is a logic to it. There's no question, but this motif, which opens it, which parallels Beethoven, and by the way, when he came back and changed from the idea of tone poems to Symphony No. 2, it was because he was influenced hugely, Sibelius by Beethoven, and here's the parallel, and so what you get in that first movement is a whole range of almost bits and pieces which come together as the symphony progresses and which has a whole range of really interesting components to it, both a kind of lyricism and a restlessness and a reflection of so much of Sibelius's work. Even though it started in

Italy, you just have that sense of the desolation of the Finnish countryside, so let's listen to the opening, the three-notes stepwise ascending motif which comes back over and over, and we'll listen to three or four minutes of it just to give you a sense of how the symphony unfolds.

(An audio clip of the first movement of Sibelius' 1902 "Symphony No. 2" plays)

Thank you very much. All right, we could we could stop it at this point. We can stop the clip. We could carry on, but I hope you've seen just how he builds on a three ascending-note theme right through. It's exactly this, you know, just look at the comparison debate over fifth. It's quite extraordinary, obviously, in his own style, and, of course, it starts to build up through the second and the third movement, but I don't have time to deal with that because my purpose always here is to introduce works that you can go and listen on proper stereo equipment to in your own time, but I want to, if I may, come to the fourth movement. I'm going to play the last five minutes because here, the fragments end, and there's a real coherence to that last movement. There's a theme, one theme, which he develops magnificently. Starts off very quietly at the beginning of the 14-odd minutes of the final movement, very quietly, and then it's explored, and essentially, then, it sort of thunderously is developed right to the end, and you can see why people regarded this as a luminous protest of national identity against Russian incursions. We're going to pick it up with five minutes to go. Leonard Bernstein conducting the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra in his typical fashion, the last five minutes of the Sibelius Second. Yes, that's the one.

(An audio clip of the fourth movement of "Symphony No. 2" plays)

Just absolutely, it just builds up towards the end. It's quite extraordinary, just that one theme, and you can see why that theme is basically a theme which people regard as basically reflecting the nationalism which was evident in the "Finlandia."

What I want to do is just move briefly to talk about one other work, the marvellous Violin Concerto, and it's really interesting because Sibelius himself wanted to play the violin, but he only started when he was quite old, and he said, "I dreamt of becoming a virtuoso violinist," but because of the late start, he had stage fright, and he really couldn't do very much about it, but because of the level of instrument, the Violin Concerto in D minor, which might well be his greatest masterpiece of all, was composed. Interestingly enough, he composed it in his late 20s, began to compose it in 1902 at exactly the same time as the work that we've just heard as well as "Finlandia." His wife spoke about the following. She said this. She said, "The first performance of the concerto "is now definitely decided for 8th February, "but that, however, is uncomfortably soon.

"Janne," all of Sibelius's friends and family called him Janne, "had been in the throes of it all the time, "and so have I. "Again, it has been an embarrassment of riches. "He has so many ideas forcing the way into his mind "that he becomes quite literally dizzy. "He's awake night after night, plays wonderful things, "and can't tear himself away "from the marvellous music he plays. "There are so many ideas that one cannot believe it is true, "all of them so rich in possibilities for development, "so full of life, "but if I've been excited by all of this, "I would have also suffered too. "I'm happy to have been able "to be so near him all this time. "Whether my presence "is any help to him in his darker moments, I cannot say," but clearly, there were lots of ideas which were floating around, and the truth about it is that it's, well, let me put it this way. It seems to me that it begins with perhaps the most captivating opening in the entire repertoire. What we hear are muted divisi strings, that the strings divided, and the soloist then begins a very haunting melody echoed by lone clarinet, and then, of course, the music starts to develop. We see virtuoso passages. We'll just listen to a bit of that for the violin above more stormy orchestral accompaniment. Then the metre changes from 4/4, one, two, three, four, to 6/4, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, as the orchestra transforms that fragment of the opening. It's really a magnificent first movement, and let us just listen to Maxim Vengerov, the young man playing this concerto, so let's listen to the opening first movement.

(An audio clip of the first movement of the 1905 "Violin Concerto" plays)

All right, I think we can stop there. Otherwise, we'll- We can stop the clip. It's magnificent. I hope you just noticed the way the metre changes, the virtuoso pieces. I mean it's just, and, of course, Vengerov, what a violinist. Uh! Ay-yi-yi! I thought I would end just by a short clip on the second movement, which has this very lovely brief introduction by the woodwinds, and then the soloist begins a very slow second movement with a long melody which essentially seems to have found its source in songs which Sibelius wrote earlier and which essentially also reflected, to some extent, the nationalism that some people divined in his work. The reason I'm going to play this for you, it's another very famous violinist from an earlier era, David Oistrakh, so just listen to the first two or three minutes, and then we'll conclude the lecture. No, no, That's the- Yeah, there we go.

(An audio clip of the second movement of the "Violin Concerto" plays)

You can- We can stop the clip. We can stop the clip. I just wanted to give you a sense of that. It's a very old video, but, of course, what a magnificent violinist he was as well, and what an extraordinarily beautiful movement this long soloist has, so I just want to make two final points. I mentioned at the beginning that after 1924, this man who'd composed this extraordinary music, some of which we've listened

to, I could have played you the Fourth, the Fifth, the Sixth, and the Seventh Symphonies, all of which are absolutely wonderful, and I could have analysed them because each of them has rich potential of analysis, but what I find so sad is that after 1924 he wrote nothing. He promised an Eighth Symphony to Koussevitzky, who, of course, was the, had wanted it for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and to a large degree, had basically promoted his work, and in fact, played a whole series of work of all these symphonies, and then ended by begging him for it, and there's a lot, if you look at the biography or biographies of Sibelius, apparently, they derive a lot of their information from correspondence between Sibelius and Koussevitzky, which is in the Library of Congress, letters and letters, on almost a monthly basis, pleading for the Eighth, and eventually, Sibelius promising in various times. It never came. He never composed another symphony after the Seventh, and yet he was this extraordinarily famous composer, and let me just end on one point about that if I can find my quote.

Yes, in 1944, in Otto Preminger's thriller "Laura," a detective played by Dana Andrews interrogates a rather shady individual portrayed by Vincent Price. Dana Andrews: "You know a lot about music." Vincent Price: "I don't know a lot about anything, "but I know a little about practically everything." "Yeah, then why did you say "they played Brahms's First and Beethoven's Ninth "at the concert Friday night? "They changed the programme at the last minute, "and they played nothing but Sibelius," and for many years, during that period, basically, in many cases, nothing but Sibelius was played because the music was so magnificent, and yet it dried up, and he died a man basically consuming vast quantities of alcohol, a great deal of sadness, and yet he was a genius. Seems to say a huge amount about the human condition one way or the other, particularly creative people. Let me just see if there are any questions that anybody wants answered. I'll just briefly run through them.

Q & A and Comments

I know somebody called Vivian doesn't like, didn't like... "There's only one 'God Save the Queen.'" Actually, what I want to say was I think the way in which you can interpret "God Save the Queen" in that way, or "King," to do something interpolating it through a Jewish prayer, which essentially has quite a lot of meaning in this connection, is quite magnificent, and I'm delighted to see that a whole lot of you agreed with me entirely, and thank you for that.

Yes, Mona, I think that "Finlandia," as I said, "Marche Slave," "1812 Overture," quite right. I'm sorry that the medium doesn't do justice to it. It doesn't. I agree with you. I wish I could play you on a proper stereo system, proper hi-fi system, but I can't, and all I'm trying to do is to illustrate the music as best I can, so I apologise for that.

Carol, the Second Symphony, the first part, clip, was played by the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. Petrenko's now, I think, joined the Philharmonia. He's a fantastic conductor, but it was the Liverpool Phil was done in Liverpool, which I'm sure David Peimer would love.

Thank you very much, Erica. Thank you, Sarah. I think Vengerov is absolutely wonderful. It's interesting that you say when I, I think it's further on this concerto that I always hear "Avinu Malkeinu." Yeah, there is something like that.

Thank you very much, Rona, and thanks to you, Sarah, and I agree with you. Oistrakh was absolutely magnificent, Margaret. I was never able to visit, and I have been to Finland, but I would've loved to have been there. It is amazing that a small country could produce geniuses like him, and Gerald, thank you.

I know that Beethoven had variations on "God Save the King." I agree entirely, but let me not say more. Yes, I'm more than happy to do another Sibelius, Grandma Lorna, and may I then just take the opportunity to wish those of you who are involved, Rosh Hashanah, to have a very wonderful Shanah tovah u'metuka, a sweet, peaceful, and prosperous year. May we all be together to listen to glorious music next year. Have a wonderful Yontif. Good night.