

The New Zealand Herald
Premier Series

Auckland
Philharmonia

CROUCHING TIGER HIDDEN DRAGON

7.30pm, Thursday 3 October
Kiri Te Kanawa Theatre, Aotea Centre

Vengerov & Sibelius

🕒 7.30PM, THURSDAY 22 AUGUST



Film will have the original Mandarin dialogue, with English subtitles. It is rated M for low level violence.

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CONDUCTOR Okko Kamu
VIOLIN Maxim Vengerov

SIBELIUS *En Saga*
SIBELIUS Symphony No.6
SIBELIUS Violin Concerto
SIBELIUS *Finlandia*

Programme Notes



For artist biographies,
please visit our website

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)
En Saga (1892 rev. 1902)

DURATION: c.18'

The Finland in which Sibelius grew up was ruled by the Tsar of the Russian Empire Alexander II. Before the Russians took over in 1809, Finland had been part of the kingdom of Sweden for six centuries. Therefore, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries Finland took part in the European movements pushing for nationalist self-determination. Sibelius's work is best read against the fervent artistic and political debates of the time.

Even though its title is Swedish, *En Saga* marks an important step on this journey. Sibelius said that the work was about his own youthful experiences and what they symbolised rather than any specific narrative. Musically, *En Saga* shows Sibelius wrestling with Wagner, like every young composer of the late 19th century had to. The Wagnerian influence is mostly in the orchestration and the harmonic writing; unlike Wagner, who organised his music around short leitmotifs, Sibelius composes a series of varied rotations through two long folklike melodies.

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)
Symphony No.6 (1923)

- I. *Allegro molto moderato*
- II. *Allegretto moderato*
- III. *Poco vivace*
- IV. *Allegro molto*

DURATION: c.30'

The Sixth is probably the least performed of Sibelius's symphonies, but also one of his most interesting. The composer himself was ambiguous about it, one time saying it was "wild and impassioned in character" but another time saying it could be subtitled "When shadows lengthen". While the symphony sticks closely to classical formal norms it is primarily modal in its harmony: it is not in D minor, but rather D Dorian, a callback to the 16th-century music that Sibelius was interested in when he was composing the symphony.

Palestrina and his contemporaries are immediately apparent at the beginning of the first movement, but before long Sibelius combines his trademark long-line melodies with this modal style creating a hybrid unique in the literature. The second movement opens ambiguously, a main theme slowly attempting to take shape

but never quite attaining it. The movement unfolds in continuously developing variation, the experimental nature of the technique somewhat hidden behind Sibelius's careful orchestration. The short third movement, which Sibelius referred to as 'Renaissance hunting', is in a more conventional sonata form. The finale refers to Renaissance chorale styles and fast-moving fugatos of the Baroque, with ornamental volutes from the winds.

INTERVAL

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)
Violin Concerto (1904 rev. 1905)

- I. *Allegro moderato*
- II. *Adagio di molto*
- III. *Allegro ma non tanto*

DURATION: c. 35'

Sibelius's only concerto was originally composed for German violinist Willy Burmester, but he could not come to Finland to play it so Sibelius hired a teacher at the Helsinki Institute of Music, Czech Victor Nováček, to premiere it at the last minute. Because of the lack of preparation time and the concerto's length and difficulty, the premiere was a disaster. Seeing merit in the work, Sibelius revised the concerto considerably, and in this form it has become a cornerstone of the repertoire.

Sibelius eschews some of the conventions of the concerto in favour of a grander and more unified structure, although the solo part is nonetheless very virtuosic. The main innovation is in the first movement's cadenza: normally a tacked-on solo, the cadenza here makes up the entire development section of the movement's sonata form. This integrates the soloist into the concerto's structure more than had been attempted before. The second movement begins with questioning motives in

the winds; the violin's answer is a long lyrical melody sensitively accompanied by the orchestra. Sibelius cleverly elides cadences so that the first four minutes of the movement feel like a single massive phrase. This leads to a more tempestuous middle section, after which the violin melody, now played by the orchestra with the violin embellishing above, continues its slow development. The dance-like third movement is the most outwardly virtuosic, calling for the whole range of the violin's techniques.

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)
Finlandia (1900)

DURATION: c.8'

In 1899, the Finnish press, protesting against the censorship policies of the Russian Empire, announced a series of festivities to raise money to help journalists who had been fired by the censors. One item on the programme was a series of tableaux vivants (a then-popular theatrical form where non-moving actors and elaborate scenery portrayed static scenes from history and legend) accompanied by music by Sibelius. The music for the final tableau, about the present-day glories of Finland (called 'Finland, Awake!'), was the most successful, so Sibelius arranged it into a stand-alone tone poem, *Finlandia*.

The tone poem opens with low notes that are often heard as emerging from the Finnish forests, but in the original tableaux they represented the modern railway, specifically the Lemminkäinen train on its journey north. The growling train, having picked up speed, gives way to a hymn, the most popular part of the work and one that would take on a life of its own as both an important national song in 20th-century Finland and as a popular tune in Christian hymnals.

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