

JEAN SIBELIUS

Symphony No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 82

Born: Hämeenlinna, Finland, December 8, 1865

Died: Järvenpää, Finland, September 20, 1957

Work composed: 1915-19

First performance: First version: December 8, 1915, in Helsinki; Robert Kajanus conducted the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra. Final version: November 24, 1919, in Helsinki; The composer conducted the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra

Jean Sibelius wrote his **Fifth Symphony** during the difficult years of World War I, and its creation also was difficult and protracted. An initial version of the piece, performed in December 1915, displeased the composer, who withdrew the score for revision. A second version, performed the following year, also failed to meet his standards. The composer then abandoned the work for a year or more, but by May of 1918 he wrote a letter that included the following about his recent activity: “The 5th Symphony in a new form – practically composed anew – I work at it daily. Movement 1 entirely new ... for the finale, the old motifs but stronger in revision. The whole, if I may say so, a rising climax to the end. Triumphant.”

Still, more than another year went by before Sibelius completed the symphony in a way that satisfied him. This is the form in which we know the music today, and it varies significantly from the initial 1915 conception. Perhaps the most conspicuous difference is the reduction of the number of movements from four to three, which the composer achieved by telescoping what had been the first two movements into one.

The symphony begins with an arching horn call, answered and extended by woodwind figures. Initially bright, the music’s harmonic complexion soon darkens. Other ideas follow, including a series of distant bugle figures that seem a call to arms, and Sibelius leads his themes through some dramatic metamorphoses.

At length the music turns in a new direction, quickly accelerating into an energetic scherzo section, derived from what originally had been the symphony’s second movement. Though distinct in character from the music that preceded it, this nevertheless feels palpably connected to what has gone before, since Sibelius not only effects a quite seamless transition to the new section but bases the scherzo largely on the horn call motif that opened the work. Moreover, the feeling of tense drama previously established returns, and with heightened intensity.

The second movement is based on a theme plucked out by the strings and, in alternating phrases, by the flutes. Everything that follows is a development or variation of this single idea. Much of the music flows like a forest stream, at times cascading down slopes or over obstacles, occasionally slowing to form a quiet pool, and once in a while threatening to overflow its banks in an exuberant rush of orchestral sound.

The finale, long one of most popular movements in Sibelius’ symphonic output, has as its initial idea a swiftly moving melody given out by the strings. But the chief attraction is the second theme and its bold horn figures, which the English conductor and commentator Donald Francis Tovey likened to the Norse god Thor swinging his hammer.

This subject returns in several guises during the course of the movement, most impressively in the symphony's climactic final moments.

What to Listen For

The horn call figures of the symphony's opening moments generate much of the impassioned first movement. More stringently, the quiet melody presented by strings and flutes at the start of the second movement provides all the material Sibelius will need for this portion of the piece. The third movement features great circling horn figures that engender some of the most ecstatic music in Sibelius's output.

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