



SIBELIUS AND NATURE

In his memoirs of his schooldays, Walter von Konow describes the love of nature shown by his childhood friend and classmate Jean Sibelius in such passages as the following: "Janne was a great dreamer. He had a powerful imagination, easily receiving impressions from the external world. It was in harmony with his deep love of nature. He would wander for long distances in the vicinity of Hämeenlinna and in the woods of Sääksmäki. His vivid imagination animated his whole environment. In the twilight he fancied he was looking for fairy-tale figures in the darkest depths of the forest. If his fancy turned to horrors, it was sometimes rather frightening to walk with him through the dark woods; where trolls and witches and other monsters kept their abode. Sometimes our imaginations were so stimulated that as dark fell we saw fearful creatures rising from their hiding places. Then we ran away as quickly as our legs would carry us. When we had safely come near home, Janne whispered hoarsely to me: 'I can hear footsteps behind us.'"

Sibelius and nature is a subject which has been much misunderstood both in Finland and elsewhere. Thus, in writing of the first performance of the Fourth Symphony, one Helsinki critic fabricated a programme for it based throughout on the views from Koli, the best-known hill in North Karelia. Sibelius, as a matter of principle, felt that this misunderstanding was so serious that, against

his usual practice, he publicly announced his disagreement with the critic's interpretation. He did not deny the influence of nature on his inspiration, but he sharply rejected the idea that exterior influences had placed their stamp on his Fourth Symphony.

His other Symphonies also must be approached from the viewpoint of absolute music. Much has been said about Finland's thousands of lakes and remote blue forests. They have been put forward as the essential features of Sibelius' musical language. Nature in Finland must undoubtedly be considered as a powerful factor when speaking of Sibelius' music as a whole. But in works which are absolute music, nature is as it were dissolved among other characteristics. Exaggeratedly concrete descriptions of nature, references to the climate and land of Finland have had an undeniably negative effect on the understanding of Sibelius' music in the international field.

Sibelius wasn't a sort musical tourist. He said once that nature should be in a man's soul. His experience of nature sought no exterior expression; rather it was interior. This is also true of those compositions which, one can see from the titles, have drawn their inspiration from the nature. Sibelius composed many pieces of this kind throughout his musical career. Even the Five Sketches for piano, Opus 115 (1929), which are

among his very last works, describe throughout impressions of nature: Landscape, Winter, Forest pool, Forest song, Spring scene.

The second strong vein in the ore of Sibelius' music is the world of the ancient ruins of Kalevala. This world is the fruitful root from which his youthful works grow, and to which he constantly returns at different stages of his career. His last symphonic poem with Kalevala motif is Tapiola, Opus 112, written in 1925. Here Sibelius seems to return to the land of song of his youth. The interesting thing in "Tapiola," one of his greatest works, is that for the last time the two main lines of the composer's psyche are combined: his love of nature and the world of ancient Finnish poetry. The Kalevala differs from all other national epics in that it is very rich in descriptions of nature. All nature is personified. It deals with all the objects of nature, visible and invisible, and the rune singer feels an inseparable part of nature. What did von Konow say of the schoolboy: "His vivid imagination animated his whole environment. In the twilight he fancied he was looking for fairy-tale figures in the darkest depths of the forest. If his fancy turned to horrors, it was sometimes

rather frightening to walk with him through the dark woods, where trolls and witches and other monsters keep their abode." And what did the famous Finnish conductor Georg Schnéevoigt say of "Tapiola:" "In this work of genius Sibelius was inspired by secret voices and fantasies which cannot be described in words. We are filled with a secret fear as we come under the spell of the composer's fairy-tale imagination." The word Tapiola says nothing to the listener who is ignorant of the world of the ancient Finnish runes. For this reason Sibelius put into the score, as kind of motto, a verse in German, French and English telling the gloomy, secret, ancient forests of the North and of the great god and the spirits of the woods, Tapio and his people.

Thus the circle of the little boy's and the great composer's experience of nature is closed. In a conversation with a young musician in February 1946, Sibelius said: "I — am one of those unfortunate people who feel enormously strongly spring's crescendo and autumn's diminuendo."

In October 1957 the bell tolled for him.

Reprinted from "Look At Finland"



Jean Sibelius and his daughter Mrs. Paloheimo with the American conductor Eugene Ormandy.

JEAN SIBELIUS — 1894 →

Jean Sibelius' artist friends' view of the composer.

