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2015-2016 – A Celebration of the Montgomery Philharmonic’s 10th Anniversary Season Concert 4 – April 10, 2016

Jean Sibelius

Finlandia | Night Ride and Sunrise | Symphony No. 7

About Jean Sibelius –

Jean Sibelius was the eldest son of Christian Gustaf Sibelius, a medical doctor, and Maria Charlotta Sibelius nee Borg. Unfortunately, Sibelius’ father died when he was 3, leaving his pregnant mother with a great amount of debt. As a result, she had to sell their house and move in with her aged mother. Sibelius’ male influence, fortunately, was his uncle, Pehr Ferdinand Sibelius, a violinist. Pehr gave Sibelius a violin when he was 10 and encouraged his musical interests. Sibelius also had another strong interest as a young boy—nature. He loved to hike in the Finnish countryside and fortunately the family had a summer home on the southern coast of Finland, in the small town of Loviisa. His uncle’s support, along with Sibelius’ early interest in nature, helped to shape Sibelius’ compositions throughout his life. Sibelius played the violin in a trio with his elder sister, Linda, playing the piano and his younger brother, Christian, playing the cello. There is evidence that his very first compositions were for this family trio.

When he was 16, Sibelius began to study the violin seriously with the local bandmaster, Gustav Levander. His interest in the violin was so strong that he soon became quite accomplished and was asked to play two movements of Ferdinand David’s violin concerto with an orchestra in Helsinki.

Sibelius wasn’t the best student in school, but did succeed in math and botany. Having barely passed his school exams, he was allowed to enter the university. It was during this transition from the equivalent of high school to university that he changed his name from Johan to Jean—the French version of his name and the name of his uncle. Although Sibelius was admitted to the Imperial Alexander University in Finland to study law, he was much more interested in music, so he moved to the Helsinki Music Institute, now known as the Sibelius Academy. Following his time there, he moved to Berlin to study with Albert Becker and then to Vienna to study with the Hungarian Karl Goldmark and the Austrian Robert Fuchs. While in Vienna, Sibelius became interested in Anton Bruckner’s music, as he considered Bruckner to be the greatest living composer.

Although his music was influenced by his studies in Berlin and Vienna, the Germanic tradition was not at the center. He was keenly interested in the Finnish epic poem *Kalevala* and began writing his tone poem *Kullervo* while in Vienna. In the early 1900’s, Sibelius traveled to the United Kingdom, Italy, France, and other parts of Germany. In 1914, he traveled to the United States and premiered his symphonic poem, *Oceanides*. Carl Stoeckel, an American millionaire who created an important music festival in Norfolk, Connecticut, commissioned the work.

In 1892, Sibelius began to focus on composing mostly orchestra music with *Kullervo*. Composer Axel Törnudd described this piece as “a volcanic eruption.” The premiere was well received, but subsequent performances were not. It took a few years for his music to take hold, but slowly it did and he began to conduct his works with the Helsinki Philharmonic Society.

Sibelius composed steadily until the 1920’s. His last works were *Symphony No. 7* (1925), incidental music to *The Tempest* (1926), and *Tapiola* (1926). There is evidence that he was working on an 8th Symphony for several years, to be premiered with Serge Koussevitzky conducting in 1931, but he destroyed the score. All that remains of the work is a copy of the 1st movement and some sketches of the other movements. At the end of his life, he worked on some Masonic music and reworked a few of his earlier works.

Born: Deember 8, 1865, Hämeenlinna, Finland

Died: September 20, 1957, Järvenpää

Spouse: Aino Sibelius (m. 1892 – 1958)

Siblings: Christian Sibelius, Linda Sibelius

Children: Six Daughters – Eva, Ruth, Kristi (died very young of typhoid), Katarina, Margareta, and Heidi

Works: Seven Symphonies, Tone Poems – Finlandia, Kullervo, The Swan of Tuonela, Tapiola, En saga, Karelia Suite, Luonnotar, Lemminkäinen Suite, The Oceanides, The Tempest, 1 violin concerto plus several works violin and orchestra, 15 works for voice and orchestra, 18 works for chorus and orchestra, 1 one-act opera, 27 chamber work (mostly for strings, but a few works for brass ensemble), 20 opuses for piano, 6 organ works, 16 song cycles and choral works, 1 work for band