

Jean Sibelius: Violin Concerto in D Minor, Op.47

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) first began studying the violin at about age fifteen, harbouring the dream of becoming a virtuoso. Although he eventually abandoned that path, he composed roughly sixty works for the violin, including this single concerto. His technique may not have allowed him to perform the concerto himself, but his mastery of the instrument's idiom enabled him to craft passages of profound depth and idiomatic clarity.

Originally the concerto was dedicated to the then-famous violinist Willy Burmester; however, due to financial constraints Sibelius pressed ahead with a premature premiere on 8 February 1904 in Helsinki, giving the solo part to Viktor Nováček, a violin teacher at the Music Academy, rather than to the intended dedicatee. That first performance was unsuccessful, given the short preparation time and the extreme technical demands. It was subsequently revised and the standard version premiered on 19 October 1905 in Berlin, with the soloist Karel Halír and with Richard Strauss conducting.

An attempt to record it in 1934, with Jascha Heifetz and the Philadelphia Orchestra under Stokowski, did not work but Heifetz succeeded the following year with Beecham and the London Philharmonic Orchestra

The work adheres to the traditional concerto structure in three movements. The first movement (*Allegro moderato*) is in sonata-form and presents three clearly defined themes. The opening theme unfolds gradually from a soft accompaniment by the orchestra, giving way to a lyrical solo violin line. After a climax and a brief ornamental passage, a second theme emerges, bold and decisive, introduced by the strings and bassoons. The third theme appears with increased tempo. The development is wholly replaced by an extensive Cadenza for the violin, rooted in material derived from the first theme and traversing multiple modulations. The recapitulation begins in the bassoon, then the first theme returns, leading to a vivacious coda.

The second movement (*Adagio di molto*) takes the ternary form. It begins with a majestic slow introduction by the woodwinds, then the solo violin offers a dignified theme of noble bearing. Sibelius also uses high-register trumpets to generate tension. The central section features the soloist facing complex cross-rhythms and double-stop. In the return of the opening material, the orchestra reprises the theme across different voices, reaching a climax, and then the violin concludes with a tender short coda.

The final movement (*Allegro ma non tanto*) is a warm, Gypsy-style movement full of bright spirits and rich, shady orchestration. The main theme was once characterized by Sir Donald Tovey as a "polonaise for polar bears." Of course, Tovey meant it in good humor, for he went on to rank the work as "one of the three most attractive concertos ever written" and to remark, "I have not met with a more original, a more masterly, and a more exhilarating work than the Sibelius violin concerto."