

PROGRAM NOTES FOR NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
2022-2023 Classical Subscription Concert 06: Hilary Hahn Plays Sibelius Violin Concerto
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Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (not to be confused with the English Romantic poet) was an Afro-British composer whose popularity in the early 20th century briefly eclipsed Edward Elgar's. In fact, Elgar was an early mentor of Coleridge-Taylor's. Both he and his publisher, August Jaeger of Novello, recommended the younger man (who was still a student at the Royal College of Music) to the conductor of the annual Three Choirs Festival. The Festival commissioned the **Ballade** and premiered it in 1898. Cast in a single movement, the Ballade features attractive themes and arresting contrasts. Coleridge-Taylor's handling of the orchestra is impressive, with marvelous heart-on-the-sleeve romanticism in quieter moments. But the dramatic urgency of the opening music ultimately prevails, bring the Ballade to a decisive, heart-pumping close.

Ask a young violinist what is his or her favorite concerto and the reply will almost certainly come without hesitation: "Tchaikovsky." If you pose the same question to a seasoned professional, the answer is more likely to be: "Sibelius: I feel like it was written just for me." Violinists love the **Sibelius Violin Concerto**. Perhaps they relate to it because Sibelius played violin and understood the instrument. He plumbed every aspect of its expressive and technical capabilities in the concerto. These qualities have made it a perennial audience favorite as well. Celebrated for its brooding character, this concerto focuses on the soloist rather than the orchestra. An expanded first movement cadenza takes the place of a development section. The finale blazes with brilliant syncopations and violin fireworks. Sibelius delivers Nordic ice and

midsummer fire within a single score.

Prokofiev composed his Fifth Symphony toward the end of World War II, a period of increasing optimism. The Allies had invaded Normandy and Soviet forces were about to initiate powerful offensives against the Nazis from the eastern front. While not without its moments of conflict, the Fifth Symphony is an essentially affirming work. Certainly it reflects Prokofiev at the height of his career: healthy, productive, and writing splendidly. The musical ideas are rich and abundant, and the structure is classical, lean, and melodic. As always with Prokofiev, the writing for orchestra is brilliant. The Fifth Symphony's première in Moscow in January 1945 was the high point of Prokofiev's career after his return to the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

Ballade in A minor, Op.33

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor

Born: August 15, 1875 in London, England, United Kingdom

Died: September 1, 1912 in Croydon, England, United Kingdom

Composed: 1898

First performance: September 14, 1898 in Gloucester, England, United Kingdom

Duration: 13 minutes

Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, and strings

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (not to be confused with the English Romantic poet) was an

Afro-British composer whose popularity in the early 20th century briefly eclipsed Edward Elgar's. Born to a Black father from Sierra Leone and a white English mother, Coleridge-Taylor studied violin as a child, also singing in the church choir of Croydon. He enrolled at London's Royal College of Music at age 15 as a violin student, but soon developed a keen interest in composition. The London firm of Novello published several of his anthems in 1891 and 1892. (He was all of 16.) He was soon accepted as a composition student of Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, who was then at the forefront of English composition, and won a fellowship in composition at the College in 1893.

By the late 1890s, Coleridge-Taylor had taken up conducting, and his compositions were being performed regularly. He enjoyed remarkable success with several cantatas based on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Hiawatha*. In early 20th-century Britain, the first of them, *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* (1898) rivaled Handel's *Messiah* and Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in popularity.

Though his father returned to Sierra Leone when Coleridge-Taylor was a child and played little role in the boy's life, Samuel identified strongly with his African heritage, and regarded the dignity of the Black man as part of his artistic mission. Journeys to America in 1904, 1906, and 1910 strengthened this aspect of his music. Many of his later works incorporated Black themes.

Coleridge-Taylor's early works date primarily from his years at the Royal College of Music, before and during his study with Stanford. Like most British composers of his generation, Stanford had gone to Germany for his advanced study, and his music shows the influence of the

Brahmsian school. Most of his students followed suit, but Coleridge-Taylor felt a stronger affinity with the music of Antonín Dvořák. He was particularly drawn to the works the Czech master composed during his time in America, which made use of Black spirituals and other American melodies.

His Ballade was his first commission. It came from the annual Three Choirs Festival, which rotated among the three counties of Hereford, Gloucester, and Worcester. The Festival had approached Edward Elgar for a new orchestral composition, but Elgar was preoccupied with work on his dramatic cantata *Caractacus*. Elgar had learned of Coleridge-Taylor through August Jaeger, the editor at Novello who published both composers' music. (Jaeger and Elgar were close friends; Elgar would immortalize him the following year in the 'Nimrod' Variation of *Enigma Variations*.) Elgar concurred with Jaeger's high opinion of Coleridge-Taylor's music. Both men wrote to Herbert Brewer, the conductor of the 1898 Three Choirs Festival, recommending Coleridge-Taylor. "He has a quite Schubertian facility of invention and his stuff is always original and fresh Here is a real melodist at last," wrote Jaeger. Elgar enthused, "[He is] far and away the cleverest fellow going amongst all the young men."

Coleridge-Taylor did not disappoint, and his Ballade was warmly received at its premiere in September 1898. Cast in a single movement, the piece is related to sonata form in its clear contrast of themes: a vigorous, energetic, masculine first theme, answered by a lushly romantic second one. The structure, however, is freer than a traditional sonata. Coleridge-Taylor does develop the two principal ideas, but he does so by migrating through five other key centers. He also alters the instrumentation, with particularly effective use of the brass section. His handling

of the orchestra is impressive, with marvelous heart-on-the-sleeve romanticism in the quieter moments. Ultimately the urgency of the Ballade's opening prevails, bringing the work to a decisive, heart-pumping close.

Concerto in D minor for Violin and Orchestra, Op.47

Jean Sibelius

Born: December 8, 1865 in Hämeenlinna (Tavastehus), Finland

Died: September 20, 1957 in Järvenpää, Finland

Composed: September 1902-January 1904; revised 1905

First performance: February 8, 1904 at Helsingfors [Helsinki], Finland; Victor Nováček was the soloist; the composer conducted the Helsingfors Philharmonic (original version). The revised version was first performed in Berlin on October 19, 1905. Karl Halir was the soloist; Richard Strauss conducted.

Duration: 31 minutes

Instrumentation: woodwinds and trumpets in pairs, four horns, three trombones, timpani, violin solo and strings

Nationalist beacon: the legacy of Sibelius

The name of Jean Sibelius is inextricably linked with his homeland. Through his seven symphonies and numerous symphonic poems, notably *The Swan of Tuonela*, Op. 22, *Finlandia*, Op. 26, *Pohjola's Daughter*, Op. 49, and the rarely heard *Tapiola*, Op. 112, he established a school of Finnish music that remains among the most important modern manifestations of musical nationalism. His impact and influence on others has been equally far-ranging,

particularly among Scandinavian and British composers, and his formal ideas must be counted among the most innovative of the twentieth century. More than two decades into the twenty-first century, he remains Finland's most celebrated composer and arguably that Nordic country's most famous figure.

In light of these impressive achievements, Sibelius's Violin Concerto is something of an anomaly. We do not remember him for his concerto works, but rather for his symphonic legacy; the concerto is the only work by Sibelius for a solo instrument plus orchestra that has entered the repertory (though the six *Humoresques* for violin and orchestra, Opp.87b and 89, are unjustly neglected). How do we account for the existence of this popular work, which is so unlike anything else written by its composer?

Sibelius showed little affinity for the piano as a child, but his obvious aptitude for violin manifested itself clearly. Although he undertook violin lessons too late to consider a career as a performing virtuoso, his natural gift for the instrument found a happy outlet in the rarely heard *Humoresques* and this Violin Concerto.

Conundrum: virtuoso vehicle vs. coherent symphonic composition

The piece was originally intended for the eminent German violinist Willy Burmester, but once Sibelius completed it in 1903, he chose not to wait for Burmester's next tour to Finland in order to introduce the new composition. Victor Novacek played the first performance in Helsinki in February 1904, under the composer's baton. A critical review from the powerful Finnish critic Flodin caused Sibelius to withdraw the concerto for extensive revisions. The following year, in a

revised version, the concerto made its début in the German musical capital, Berlin. This time the soloist was Karl Halir, violinist of the Joachim Quartet, and the conductor was the celebrated German composer Richard Strauss. Sibelius wrote:

In October 1905, my violin concerto, in its revised and final form, stood its baptism of fire in Germany at a concert in the Singakademie in Berlin. The solo part was conducted by none other than Richard Strauss. As an instance of Strauss's extraordinary conscientiousness in performing the works of other contemporary composers, it should be mentioned that he had three rehearsals with the orchestra for practicing the accompaniment. But the violin concerto requires it.

The challenge that Sibelius faced was to create a virtuoso vehicle that would meet his own high standards and adhere, at least generally, to the formal guidelines expected of a major symphonic composition. In fulfilling this challenge, Sibelius avoided the daring formal experimentation associated so strongly with his orchestral works; the form of the concerto is fairly conventional, excepting the rhapsodic nature of the first movement.

Affinity for the fiddle

The orchestra is allotted a rather subordinate role, readily ceding the spotlight to the soloist. Sibelius wrote gratefully for violin; he understood the instrument from the inside out through his own extensive study. Equally important, he understood the technique of his intended first soloist, whose formidable command of the instrument is presumably reflected in the lengthy cadenza.

Sibelius is little known as a composer of songs, probably because of language difficulties outside his native Finland. His vocal gift finds an instrumental outlet in the intense and emotionally evocative *Adagio* that constitutes the concerto's slow movement. (The English writer

Donald Francis Tovey thought Sibelius's music suggested "a Bruckner gifted with an easy mastery and the spirit of a Polar explorer.") The finale, a pulsing hybrid of polonaise and rondo with some Gypsy flavor thrown in for additional color, is a thriller: rhythmically vibrant and brilliantly virtuosic without being acrobatic.

Symphony No. 5 in B-flat, Op.100

Sergei Prokofiev

Born: April 23, 1891 in Sontzovka, Ukraine, Russia

Died: March 5, 1953 in Moscow, Russia

Composed: Summer 1944

First performance: January 13, 1945 in Moscow, Russia. Prokofiev conducted the Moscow State Philharmonic Orchestra.

Duration: 46 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, timpani, bass drum, military drum, cymbals, harp, piano and strings.

Happy you conducting American premiere my Fifth Symphony. Work very close to my heart.

Sending sincere friendly greetings you and all members your magnificent orchestra.

—Telegram, Prokofiev to Serge Koussevitzky, 6 November 1945

'Work very close to my heart.' So consumed was Prokofiev by this symphony that he put off the celebrated film director Sergei Eisenstein, because he was so immersed in composing. "Now I'm

busy with work on my Fifth Symphony, and my composition is flowing along in such a way that I can't interrupt and switch over to [Eisenstein's film] *Ivan the Terrible*. I'm sure you'll understand me," he wrote apologetically to Eisenstein on July 31, 1944. Prokofiev promised to devote himself to the film score the next month, when he would return to Moscow from his summer home, Ivanovo. By then, he had completed the symphony.

Just a few months later, Prokofiev was on the podium when the Fifth Symphony was first performed in Moscow on January 13, 1945. It proved to be his swan song as a conductor.

Within four months, Europe and America were celebrating V-E day. Victory in the Pacific Theatre followed in August. Barely three months after the end of World War II, during a Soviet radio broadcast of an all-Prokofiev program on November 4, 1945. Prokofiev said:

I wrote my Fifth Symphony in the summer of 1944, and I consider my work on this symphony very significant both because of the musical material put into it and because I returned to the symphonic form after a 16-year interval. The Fifth Symphony completes, as it were, a long period of my works. I conceived it as a symphony of the greatness of the human spirit.

Along with the *Classical Symphony* and *Peter and the Wolf*, the Fifth Symphony has proved one of Prokofiev's most popular and enduring works. It is his only mature symphony to have caught the popular imagination.

Prokofiev is perhaps best known for the ballet scores (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Cinderella*). Pianists admire his magnificent contribution to the solo keyboard literature. But he was an experienced

orchestral composer, producing seven symphonies that span virtually his entire creative life: the earliest, the *Classical Symphony*, Op.25 (1916-17) was preceded by two juvenile symphonies and a number of other orchestral compositions. Nos. 2, 3, and 4 all date from the mid- to late 1920s. Then ensued the 16-year hiatus mentioned in the radio quotation above.

Soviet music and Prokofiev's patriotism

His final three symphonies are all considered Soviet works because they were written after he had returned permanently to his homeland. During the Stalin years, Soviet music was under varying degrees of state supervision. For some composers, governmental restrictions proved stifling; others flourished artistically while suffering politically. Prokofiev's late works, those from 1946 to 1953, were uneven – but the quality of his music during the war years was superb.

Despite the economic and circumstantial hardships of wartime, Prokofiev was especially productive from 1939 to 1945. He was at the peak of his composing powers, and he was still in good health. The Stalinist purges peaked in the late 1940s; the worst of that chilling period still lay in the future. Among the major works he completed during the war were the opera *War and Peace*, the ballet *Cinderella*, a string quartet, two piano sonatas, the flute sonata, five film scores and the Fifth Symphony. The latter represents the most epic side of his musical personality. It is the first overtly patriotic work not associated with theatre, film, voice, or some other programmatic medium. In the Fifth Symphony, Prokofiev's admiration for the Russian people speaks for itself through music alone.

Influences: predecessors and contemporaries

At 45 minutes, the Fifth is the largest scale of Prokofiev's seven symphonies. In it, the late romantic tradition of Borodin (rather than Tchaikovsky), and to some extent Bruckner, merges with that of his Soviet contemporary Shostakovich, whose influence is particularly audible in the emotional third movement. It is a highly melodic work, with a broad emotional spectrum that ranges from exuberant gamesmanship to heartfelt agony.

Despite the palpable "Russian-ness" of the music, Prokofiev eschews folk themes. He favors slower tempi, contributing to an aura of veiled tragedy that suffuses the symphony. The exceptions are the jaunty second movement scherzo, with its grotesque and fantastic elements, and the characteristic finale that begs to be choreographed. His bitter wit is most evident in these two movements, but the enduring message of this work is to be found in the intense drama of the first and third movements. He considered the Fifth Symphony his finest composition.