

Friday 21 March 2014 7.30pm

All Points North

WILHELM STENHAMMAR (1871-1927)

Excelsior!, Op.13

symphonic overture

The Swedish pianist, conductor and composer Wilhelm Stenhammar was born into a musical family in Stockholm in 1871. He was soon showing great musical promise, though he remained self-taught as a composer until well into his twenties. He made his conducting debut in 1897 with the premiere of the work we hear tonight, *Excelsior!*, and he went on to become chief conductor of the Göteborg Symphony Orchestra between 1906 and 1922, a time when the city was transformed into a significant centre of Nordic musical culture.

As we hear in this concert, Stenhammar's earlier compositions owe much to the influence of Wagner, Liszt and Brahms, though he later came under the sway of fellow Scandinavians Sibelius and Nielsen. As a result his music grew more overtly nationalistic and part of his cantata *Ett folk* (One People) became an unofficial Swedish national anthem.

Excelsior is a Latin adjective meaning 'higher' or 'loftier' that in English is used as an interjection with the poetic meaning of 'ever upward'. At one time a popular name for sports clubs (there was once a Birmingham Excelsior FC, for example), this elevated and elevating ideal captivated poets such as Walt Whitman and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow as well as composers such as Liszt and Romualdo Marenco (whose popular 1881 ballet *Excelsior*, choreographed by Luigi Manzotti, celebrated the scientific and industrial progress of the 19th century).

Stenhammar's *Excelsior!* was dedicated to the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra which in 1896, under the baton of no lesser figure than Richard Strauss, had accompanied Stenhammar in a performance of his own First Piano Concerto in the Prussian capital. Its title surely suggests the natural striving of a young artist, though the fact that the score bears a quotation from Goethe's *Faust* might suggest both striving upwards towards the great mysteries of life in antithesis to the pull downwards towards the more earthly pleasures of the flesh.

A sense of elevation is immediately palpable at the work's fast and passionate opening. This mood then becomes further established in passages marked *Heftig aufwärts dringend* (violently urging upwards), *Sehr feurig* (very ardent) and *wild aufschreiend* (wildly crying out). In keeping with such emotions, the contours of Stenhammar's melodies nearly always strive heroically upwards.

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SERGEI RACHMANINOV (1873-1943)

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini, Op.43

When Rachmaninov fled the Revolution in 1917, he had just 500 roubles and a case full of scores. But a friend had pointed to Rachmaninov's huge, long-fingered hands and told him not to worry – "those are *your* exchange rate". For the rest of his life, Rachmaninov would make his living as a pianist. He toured

globally (appearing several times with the Liverpool Philharmonic). “Success awaits me everywhere”, he told a journalist in 1930. “Only one place is closed to me, and that is my own country – Russia.”

But he continued to compose. In 1931, he bought a new home in Switzerland and promised himself he'd write a new work there. He planned a set of variations on a Caprice by the 19th-century violin virtuoso Niccolò Paganini – “the same theme on which Liszt and Brahms wrote variations”, as he was the first to point out. It was an inspired choice. Paganini and Rachmaninov were the greatest virtuosos of their respective eras, and both were exiles. And while legend has it that Paganini had sworn a pact with the Devil, Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* is stalked by its own spectre, the ancient funeral chant *Dies Irae*. You'll first hear it played solemnly in the 7th Variation (about 2 minutes in), and from then on the whole piece is a battle of wits between Paganini's sparky theme, Rachmaninov's virtuosity, and that baleful chant.

Don't worry about trying to “spot the tune”; when Rachmaninov wants you to hear it, you will. The 24 variations fly by so quickly that they're hard to follow individually – but Rachmaninov groups them into three sequences, like the movements of a classical concerto. The first (Variations 1-10) presents the theme, brilliantly and crisply, and then its enemy, the *Dies Irae*. The second (Variations 11-18), is the ‘slow movement’, beginning amidst swirling harp and building towards the famous 18th Variation – where Rachmaninov finally opens his heart and pours out the great romantic tune the world had been waiting for. It's actually the Paganini theme, upside down and a lot slower! The third sequence (Variations 19-24) is the *finale* – beginning with a twang, and ending with the final battle between the *Dies Irae* and the virtuoso.

Who gets the last laugh? You'll have to wait and see. But the energy, wit and soaring romance of the *Rhapsody* made it the hit Rachmaninov had longed for ever since he left Russia. He completed it in August 1934, and premiered it in Baltimore that November. Only one thing still worried its composer – he had to play it! Even for the greatest pianist in the world, that was a daunting challenge. So before every performance, he'd down a glass of crème de menthe – just to help him through the faster passages...

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JEAN SIBELIUS (1865-1957)

The Swan of Tuonela, Op.22 No.2

Today, Sibelius is valued above all for his seven great symphonies. But as a symphonist he was a late starter. It wasn't until he was 34 that Sibelius at last felt ready to give the world his official Symphony No.1, and that was only after a long period of flexing his symphonic muscles: in the tone poems *En Saga* (1892) and *The Wood-Nymph* (1894), and in the so-called *Four Legends*: a set of tone poems about the life, death and rebirth of the Finnish folk-hero Lemminkäinen which, played together, make up a grand narrative symphony.

When *The Swan of Tuonela* first appeared in 1895, it was as the third movement – or perhaps panel – of the *Four Legends* (Sibelius later changed his mind about the ordering and placed it second). Tuonela is the Hades of Finnish national legend, separated from the land of the living by a deep black river – like the Styx of classical mythology. It is on this deathly river that the Swan of Tuonela swims. In the Lemminkäinen story the hero descends from Earth to the Underworld, intent on killing the swan; but he himself is slain, and it is only the magic power of his mother which is able to bring him back to life. *The Swan of Tuonela* is a portrait of the Swan, endlessly swimming and singing. Hearing it in its original context can be very stirring, but it clearly needs no larger framework to make its impact. Indeed it became so popular that it soon began to enjoy life as a tone poem in its own right.

It is easy to see why *The Swan of Tuonela* was such a success: it is the most original and atmospheric of the *Four Legends*, and the picture it paints is haunting. The strings (muted throughout) provide a misty

background, as a solo cor anglais laments in long, quasi-improvisatory phrases – both elements owe something to Wagner, but Sibelius transforms them into something so personal that any sense of spiritual kinship is completely absent. Does *The Swan of Tuonela* have a climax? There is a passage where almost the whole orchestra (including the seven brass instruments) plays together, the strings combine in a long melody marked 'con gran suono' (with great sonority), but this falls back into hushed stillness. The cor anglais sings again, and harp and timpani deliver a tolling figure in the depths, before the opening misty string chords return, fading to nothing.

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JEAN SIBELIUS

Symphony No.3 in C major, Op.52

Allegro moderato

Andantino con moto, quasi allegretto

Moderato – allegro (ma non tanto)

At the time when Sibelius was struggling to complete his Third Symphony (1904-07), his native Finland wasn't an independent country, but rather a Grand Duchy of Russia. There was however a strong popular independence movement, whose mood Sibelius had captured with electrifying effect in works like *Karelia* (1893), whose clear call to freedom for all Finns had made him a national hero. The triumphant premiere of his Second Symphony in 1902 had prompted some Finns to hail that radiantly positive work as a 'Liberation Symphony' – the expression of a nation's yearning for freedom. But although Sibelius did little to discourage his fellow Finns from thinking in such terms, evidence suggests that Finland's drive for freedom was by no means the only thing on his mind. In fact the Second Symphony shows Sibelius wrestling as never before with matters of musical form: how to evolve a continuous developing symphonic argument from tiny motifs; how one movement can grow out of another – just as the Finale of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony emerges in splendour from the smouldering embers of the preceding Scherzo.

These were the issues Sibelius was keen to probe further when he began work on his Third Symphony. At the same time he seems to have seen his new symphony as embodying kind of protest – not political this time, but against the excesses of late Romanticism. While Mahler, Strauss and Scriabin assembled vast, colour-enriched orchestras in their symphonies and tone poems, Sibelius scaled his orchestra down. The Third Symphony is scored for the kind of forces Beethoven or Schumann would have recognised. And while typical late-Romantic symphonies stretched out over longer and longer time-spans (Mahler's Third Symphony lasts over 90 minutes in most performances), Sibelius pursued ever-greater concentration. He may have been influenced by the ideal of *Junge Klassizität* ('Youthful Classicism'), championed by his friend, the virtuoso pianist and composer Ferruccio Busoni. But he was almost certainly thinking of Beethoven, whose Fifth Symphony delivers its revolutionary message in around half an hour.

First movement

The Third Symphony's first movement could be seen as a study in economy. The opening theme – quiet but full of potential energy – is presented by cellos and basses alone: this is a kind of 'seed' from which almost everything in this first movement grows. Gradually the music builds to a vigorous climax, at which trumpets and trombones call out a three-note figure, rising by steps, derived from the outline of the cellos' and basses' musical 'seed'. Horns and woodwind take this up another step, and then the cellos enter with a singing second theme, now based on a *falling* three-note figure. This too builds quickly to a climax, which then fades; a brief pause for breath, then strings whisper an eerie scale-like figure (Sibelius marks it *ppp*). From this Sibelius begins a long, masterly crescendo. Bassoon, clarinet and oboe sing the second theme sadly to themselves, then scraps of the opening theme are heard as tension mounts. At exactly the right moment, the opening theme returns in full to announce the beginning of the recapitulation. Everything is

more or less straightforward now, until the very end, where earlier motifs now broaden into hymn-like lines for horns, woodwind and strings. Then, with an 'Amen' cadence, this remarkable movement closes.

Second movement

Having demonstrated that he could create a concise, cogent but above all vital symphonic argument, Sibelius now allows more of his romantic side to show in the following two movements. The second, *Andantino con moto, quasi allegretto*, is a slowish nocturnal dance, characterised by muted colours. The theme emerges gradually out of the repeated pizzicato motif heard at the beginning on cellos, basses and violas (the same three-note rising motif heard on brass near the start of the symphony) – a fine example of Sibelius's 'organic' thinking. This dance music alternates with passages of reflective stillness, in which flickers of light (woodwind) never lead to a brighter dawn; the effect is like one of those brief days at the heart of the Finnish winter when the sun barely shows itself above the horizon.

Third movement

At first the final movement has the character of a rapid scherzo. As in the preceding *Andantino* the music is prevaingly quiet, but now the impression is of tremendous speed. Eventually horns quietly announce a new figure, full of mystery – echoes here of the haunted forestscapes of Sibelius's atmospheric tone poem *Night Ride and Sunrise*. Just when it seems that the Scherzo is beginning to lose its sense of direction, violas take the mysterious horn figures and turn them into something more assertive – almost a fully fledged tune. Then cellos join the first violas and the almost-tune becomes a solid chordal theme in a clear C major. From now until the end of the symphony this theme dominates this music. The mood becomes increasingly energetic until it grows into a triumphant hymn, with woodwind and brass sounding through vigorously pulsating strings. One might expect a triumphant peroration; instead there is more masterly economy: a massive three-note figure, G-E-C, underlined by brass and timpani – and the Third Symphony is over.

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