THE INDEPENDENT ONLINE EDITION

Sibelius - A hostage to history

Sibelius was once the world's favourite composer but, thanks to German fascist admirers, his star waned after his death. Fifty years later, it's time to rediscover his genius, says Jessica Duchen

Published: 09 April 2007

Jean Sibelius, Finland's finest export, along with cranberry vodka and the Moomins, died in 1957 at the age of 91. In 1935 he was identified as the most popular classical composer of all, ahead of Beethoven, in a poll by the New York Philharmonic Society. But, on the 50th anniversary of his death, he is receiving scant attention in British concert halls, even though he was as fine a composer as the more popular likes of Shostakovich and Mahler.

He is set apart from his rivals by his conciseness and originality of voice, a combination of the translucent and the transcendental. Each of his seven symphonies is unique in structure, unpredictable, even startling; tautly written and organic in their use of motifs, they possess a sense of austere wonder; personal yet universal. At the time of their composition, they represented a radical departure from the symphonies of the past. Beside them, Mahler can seem self-indulgent, while Shostakovich can never be divorced from his fearsome Soviet context.

But the mysteries of Sibelius run deeper than his relative neglect. For the last 30 years of his life, he produced next to nothing. He worked on an eighth symphony, declaring several times that it would be his greatest work, but it never materialised. Eventually, said Sibelius's wife Aino, there was a bonfire at the family home. Her husband had consigned the eighth symphony to the flames.

Sibelius, born into a Swedish-speaking family in Hameelinna, a hundred kilometres north of Helsinki, had started out hoping (unsuccessfully) to be a virtuoso violinist. His early works were inspired by the folklore and scenery of his homeland; they quickly became a symbol of Finland's struggles for self-determination against the ever-encroaching Russia - even though, ironically enough, Tchaikovsky was prime among his influences. Sibelius composed prolifically at first. His Violin Concerto is a worldwide favourite; Finlandia, the Karelia Suite and Valse Triste are perennial items on popular concert programmes; his intimate, heartbreakingly beautiful songs have been recorded

with tremendous affection by clear-voiced sopranos such as Barbara Bonney and Soile Isokoski. He has been the subject of a substantial documentary by Christopher Nupen, just out on DVD, in which images of pine forests in swirling mists and blizzards are perfectly matched to the composer's tone-poem masterpiece Tapiola, with its shivering, skittering, terrifying writing for the strings. "No composer had ever made an orchestra sound like this before," notes the DVD narrator.

Yet Sibelius was, for a long time, his own worst enemy. His was a tormented personality, the forbidding image and fierce, bald, head masking the raw emotions of an intense, passionate soul. His most serious problem was entirely self-inflicted: alcoholism. Drink may have been a way of battling performance stress - he noted that he could feel incapacitated by nerves before conducting, but that if he had swallowed half a bottle of champagne first, he could do anything - but with excessive drinking went excessive spending, frequently landing him in debt. While he and his family lived in Helsinki, he would sometimes disappear on binges lasting several days. After the death of his third daughter, Kirsti, from typhoid fever in 1900, his habit headed toward dangerous levels. The building of a home in the country, Ainola ("Aino's House"), helped to remove him from the capital's temptations but, four years later, in 1908, he was hospitalised to dry out. Shortly afterwards he underwent repeated operations to remove a tumour in his throat. He had to come to terms with living under the threat of death, all too aware of life's brevity, fragility and beauty. He changed his lifestyle for a good seven years; his compositions benefited, as did his public persona; he travelled widely, visiting the US.

At the apex of this period, in 1915, while the First World War raged, Sibelius saw a flight of 16 swans and was moved to note down a sequence of music that grew into part of his Fifth Symphony, a work as soaring and elemental as the sight that inspired it: "One of the great experiences of my life! God, how beautiful," he wrote.

In Ainola, Sibelius sat out the First World War and the upheavals following the Russian Revolution, half-heartedly battling his renewed addiction, working slowly at his sixth and seventh symphonies. With time, he grew increasingly reclusive, affected by nervousness, a tremor in his hands and cataracts. Ainola and his close family provided a crucial safety net and continued to protect him, and his reputation, after his death.

If Sibelius has not been accorded the full celebration that he deserves, there's more behind it than his personal foibles. It was unfortunate for him that, in the 1930s, leading Nazis took a liking to his music. By the time Hitler came to power, Sibelius was firmly established as the world's most popular living composer. Given the stirring emotions and nationalistic edge of his early works, it is no wonder that German fascists tried to appropriate his music. His accessibility, idealism and evocations of nature made him certain for approval, when

compared to the 12-tone wailings of Schoenberg and Berg. Hitler awarded Sibelius the Goethe Medal in 1935, on the occasion of the composer's 70th birthday, and, in 1942, Goebbels founded a German Sibelius Society. Sibelius made no objection; he was not noted for refusing honours.

The death blow was delivered after the war by the German philosopher, sociologist and musical theorist Theodor Adorno. Certain critics, notably Olin Downes in New York, had used Sibelius to berate composers such as Schoenberg and Stravinsky; Adorno, consequently, bore Sibelius a grudge for his very popularity, so was keen to associate him with Nazi ideology. "Sibelius's supporters scream in chorus: 'nature is all, nature is all'. Great Pan, and where necessary blood and earth, step up into the picture," he blustered, evoking the Nazis' blut und boden slogans.

Nothing could have been further from the truth, as revealed in Erik Tawaststjerna's definitive five-volume biography of Sibelius: in his diary the composer lambasted anti-Semitism and declared the Nazis' race laws "the most complete hogwash". But the damage had been done.

Adorno was an influential thinker, and contributed greatly to the prevailing post-war aesthetic in which critics condemned new music that seemed "conservative", and failed to toe the line of the 12-tone system. No matter that most of Sibelius's works had been composed decades earlier. Countless superb composers found their creative lives devastated by this trend, which was far removed from audience perceptions, yet hugely influential with the musical world's decision-makers.

Did Sibelius burn his eighth symphony because of chronic self-doubt? Or because he could guess the work's likely fate in such a climate? One way or another, these critical strictures helped to force the century's greatest symphonist into artistic suicide.

Fifty years on, it's too late to save his last symphony, but not too late to restore Sibelius to his rightful status. Arguments still rage among musicologists over the politicisation of Sibelius in Europe but, with increasing distance, it's becoming possible at last to accept that the 20th century had room for Schoenberg and Sibelius. There could be no better time to reassess his achievements and to toast this genius of the symphony lavishly in cranberry vodka.