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Sibelius Cycle Preconcert and Radio Talks (4), Sydney Symphony/Ashkenazy, Sydney Opera House

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what's on

Sibelius Cycle Preconcert Talks

Andrew Schultz, Dean of the Arts Faculty at Wollongong University and a respected composer, will present the pre-concert talks for the entire Cycle. You can read a synopsis of Andrew's talks here, offering greater insight into this wonderful musical event.

"I have indeed, had to suffer a good deal for having persevered in composing symphonies at a time when practically all composers turned to other forms of expression. My stubbornness was an eyesore to many critics and conductors." - Jean Sibelius

It is interesting to consider the connection between hardship, suffering and turmoil in a composer's life and the capacity to create superb symphonic work. The three great symphonists of the early twentieth century show this even though they had radically different approaches to their work. Mahler was not crippled by his numerous personal tragedies but drew on them to create symphonies of transcendent scale. Shostakovich lived through vast social and political upheaval and had to struggle to survive the Soviet system yet created public statements in his symphonies that are by turns bizarre, ironic and triumphant. Sibelius also lived through immense national and international upheaval, family hardships and tragedies and intense inner struggles yet created a personal series of lucid and evocative symphonies of expressive range. All three composers emerged with quite different models from a nineteenth century tradition that saw the symphony as an abstract but communicative form. A form in which musical logic is more important than the descriptive or depicting writing of the tone poem or program music. The nature of the form allows the translation of lived experience into profound musical thought. The symphony as a genre craves the condition of the abstract almost as a release from the mundane and the personally painful.

The seven symphonies of Jean Sibelius form the basis of this series of concerts. Together with the Violin Concerto and a number of programmatic orchestral works (Finlandia, The Oceanides, Luonnotar and Tapiola) they provide an opportunity to observe the growth and maturation of Sibelius' musical thought over the period from 1898 to 1926 during which they were all composed. Not much of Sibelius' significant music predates the Symphony No 1 (to be heard in the first program). It was composed in 1898 and revised and finalised by the end of 1900. Thirty years and six more symphonies later, many hoped for a Symphony No 8. Sibelius seemed happy to fuel rumours that such a work would happen yet the piece was never brought to fruition. Tapiola and the Symphony No 7 date from the last years of the 1920s and are the last works in this series of concerts. He composed little after 1930 - unable to compose not because of physical circumstances but through either heightened self-criticism or weakened inspiration. In all, his life's work as a composer occupies not much more than thirty years - an amazing thing for someone who lived from 1865 until 1957, ninety-two years. Paradoxically, those thirty years of creative productivity were also amongst the most personally challenging and impoverished of his life.

Sibelius came from an educated but not especially musical family of Swedish speaking Finns. The name Sibelius is the Latinised form of Sibbe - quite a few names are found in Finnish with the same 'lius' ending. Swedish was still the language of many middle class Finns in the period although Finland was largely under Russian domination by the late nineteenth century rather than the Swedish control of earlier periods. The Tsarist Empire attempted in the early 1900s to enforce a policy of Russification of language and culture that was dismally unsuccessful and only encouraged nascent Finnish nationalism. Caught geographically between the Russian and German superpowers and historically between the Soviet revolution and the rise of Hitler and two world wars the Finnish national state struggled to emerge. Poverty, starvation, disease, economic crises, military atrocities and



Sibelius 2004



Vladimir Ashkenazy

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fanatical politics: it is easy to forget the raw tumult of the period in Northern Europe when faced with music which has so much calm logic and beauty.

Johan Sibbe, or Jean Sibelius as we know him, was the son of a doctor who died whilst the composer was still a young boy. His mother and siblings experienced considerable financial hardship as a result. In his teens he took up the violin and perhaps because of the relatively late start he never achieved his aspirations as a solo violinist. Perhaps also because of his late start, or simply through his own predisposition, he was often plagued by acute self-doubt and a tendency to see or imagine malevolent forces at work against him in the musical world. In addition to the violin, Sibelius developed an interest in composition and during his student days composing took over for him and he achieved considerable success at music schools in Helsinki, Berlin and Vienna. He also established a well-earned reputation as a heavy drinking and financially reckless young man somewhat torn between his attraction to the bright lights of Berlin and the intense affection he clearly felt for his homeland...

Read **PART TWO** of Andrew Schultz's revealing study of Sibelius [here](#).

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what's on

Sibelius Cycle Pre-Concert Talk - part 2

Andrew Schultz, Dean of the Arts Faculty at Wollongong University and a respected composer, will present the pre-concert talks for the entire Sibelius Cycle. You can read a synopsis of Andrew's talks here, offering greater insight into this wonderful musical event.

PART TWO - read part one [here](#)

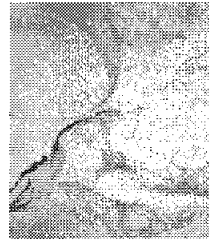
Sibelius' early works show the stamp of the main currents of central European music at the time. Wagner, Dvorak, Tchaikowsky, and Brahms are probably all there in the character of his first works but mixed as well with an interest in Scandinavian national stories and emerging Finnish culture. That interest was immediately apparent in some of his first popular tone poems including *En Saga*, the *Karelia Suite*, *Lemminkainen Legends*, *The Swan of Tuonela* and, of course, *Finlandia*. These early works also assured a significant place for him in Finnish culture – a kind of musical embodiment of the national struggle that saw him elevated to national icon status by the time of World War Two.

The early influences also show the contradictions he was faced with as a composer: the absolute music of Brahms, the melodious nationalism of Dvorak, the autobiographical emotionalism of Tchaikowsky, the repugnant but amazing myth-inspired music dramas of Wagner. Throughout his work contradictions can be found to exist. He composed light music and symphonies, programmatic and abstract work, smaller works that seem to have been dashed off and large scale works that showed the effect of constant revision over many years; in short his work covers the range from the purely pragmatic and commercial to those works that seemed to be part of a personal quest and stood outside of economic realities. A comment from the composer from 1918 clarifies this: 'these symphonies of mine are more in the nature of professions of faith than my other works.'

A personal quest is most evident in the symphonies and their evolution shows a composer moving steadily from the Romantic and overtly nationalist to the subtle, abstract and evocative. 'The older I grow the more classical I become'. The austere Fourth Symphony is especially interesting as a kind of turning point; 'there is nothing of the circus about it' as the composer put it. His symphonies become steadily more compressed and less repetitious in their material over his life. Throughout his career he was fundamentally a composer interested in harmony. He decried the contemporary emphasis on counterpoint, at one point referring to polyphony as 'the error of our day' (presumably thinking of Schoenberg and Webern). His phrase shapes and musical themes become steadily more concentrated and concise as he evolves.

Modal sources, folk-like themes, tunefulness, lightness of touch contrasting with over-powering lower brass bombast remain throughout his work. But a far more personal, headlong rush of concentrated material in later works replaces the earnest developmental style of the early symphonies. The later symphonies also show the work of a composer who kept revising so that what we are left with at times can feel epigrammatic and fleeting. Organic shapes that evolve out of the material replace the conventional movement shapes of the early works. There is a sense of grand design in the works that some have described as mosaic-like – as an assemblage of bits. Sibelius disliked the view however, that saw the material as fragments first: 'I do not build my themes out of small fragments.'

Sibelius' music is often held up as a paragon of Finnish national identity. 'Icy, chilling, bleached like snow, granite-like'; the Nordic adjectives pile up quickly in commentary on his work. Sibelius did spend much of his creative life at Ainola, the lakeside house that looks like a Scandinavian composer's should. Yet whilst Australians might take for granted that a



Sibelius 2004



Vladimir Ashkenazy

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composer's environment will effect his or her music there are some who argue otherwise. Perhaps what really shapes creative personality is how musical the composer's family was; in other words, whether a composer is an insider or an outsider to musical traditions. A composer of popular but original music, with an unusual and complex background and living in a unique environment – the Sibelius mix is rich and distinctive. During these talks I will look at the individual works and the themes and ideas mentioned above but also try to answer some riddles of Sibelius' development.

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faqs

We've tried to answer many of the questions people ask about the Sydney Symphony in this FAQ section. You can use the dropdown to look at different categories of question.

If you have any other question about the Sydney Symphony please email info@sso.com.au

select category:

Q: I haven't attended a symphony performance before, what important information do I need to know?

Q: What facilities are available for people with disabilities?

Q: I haven't attended a symphony performance before, what important information do I need to know?

Answer: You don't need formal knowledge of music to enjoy a Symphony performance, but you can find out more about the music being performed by reading our informative printed concert programs (available for sale at most concerts for \$7), and by taking advantage of the free pre-concert talks listed (45 minutes before all Sydney Opera House performances).

Symphony audiences wear anything from formal suits to jeans and other casual clothing. We encourage concert-goers to feel comfortable when attending a concert. We do ask, however, that you consider other patrons' enjoyment at performances. Coughing during performances disturbs everyone's enjoyment. An unmuffled cough is heard in all areas of the auditorium and creates a serious distraction for musicians and soloists. Cough lozenges are available from the Concert Hall foyer bars before each Sydney Opera House performance, and at interval. Please refrain from eating or unwrapping sweets during a performance. If you require cough lozenges, we suggest you unwrap individual lozenges prior to the performance.

Please ensure that pagers, mobile telephones and alarm watches are switched off. If you are expecting an urgent message, please leave your pager and your seat number with the House Manager, who will deliver your message at an appropriate break.

Taking of photographs or recordings of any kind is a breach of copyright. All venues are smoke-free environments.

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Q: What facilities are available for people with disabilities?

Answer:

The **Sydney Opera House** provides limited on-site accessible parking at \$11 per space. Reservations can be made on 9250 7777. Access to the Concert hall is by lifts on the ground floor at Stage Door.

The Concert Hall has a loop system in selected areas. Hearing aids should be set to the T position when using this system where possible. An infra-red system is also available. Please advise the box office.

The Opera House also publishes a guide for people with disabilities. Please call 9250 7185.

The **City Recital Hall** has wheelchair seats. The main entrances are at footpath level and all levels are accessible by lift from foyer and carpark. There is a hearing induction loop for every seat. Headsets are available free from cloakroom. For details, please call 8256 2222.

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about us



The internationally-acclaimed Sydney Symphony is resident at the iconic Sydney Opera House, performing more than 180 concerts a year with some of the world's most illustrious conductors and soloists. One of Australia's leading cultural ambassadors, the Sydney Symphony is proud of its heritage and cultural diversity, reflecting the vibrancy and uniqueness of this wonderful city.

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Q & A with Ilmar

We get up close and personal with **Ilmar Leetberg**, the Sydney Symphony's Artistic Liaison...



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16/06/2004



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**Re Sibelius Interval Feature Broadcasts
on ABC Classic FM**

Dear Dr Schultz

This letter confirms that ABC Classic FM broadcast four interval features prepared and presented by you during direct broadcast concerts given by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra conducted by Vladimir Ashkenazy. The dates and durations of these concert interval feature broadcasts were as follows:

At 20:00 on 12/11/2004 – Sydney Symphony Orchestra Metro Great Classics Concert/Sibelius 1.
Duration of interval feature 19'18";

At 20:00 on 17/11/2004 - Sydney Symphony Orchestra Gala Concert/Sibelius 2. Duration of interval feature 17'07";

At 20:00 on 19/11/2004 - Sydney Symphony Orchestra Master Concert/Sibelius 3. Duration of interval feature 18'27";

At 20:00 on 24/11/2004 - Sydney Symphony Orchestra Master Concert/Sibelius 4. Duration of interval feature 19'04".

Lorna Lander
Project Officer
ABC Classic FM
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Direct fax 02) 8333 2802

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