

BEDFORDSHIRE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

Saturday 27 February 2027

Corn Exchange, Bedford, 7:30pm

Conductor: Bjorn Bantock

Programme

Karelia Suite, Op. 2

Jean Sibelius
(1865 - 1957)

Intermezzo: Moderato

Ballad: Tempo di Menuetto

Alla Marcia: Moderato

At the time of Sibelius's birth, Finland was emerging into national consciousness, beset by two foreign influences that frustrated any fulfilment of independence. Russian rule was tightened in the 1890s when the movement for national self-determination developed and, owing to earlier Swedish domination, Swedish remained the language of the professional middle classes, including Sibelius's own parents, and it was also the medium for teaching in the important centres of higher education.

Sibelius's parents countered these influences by sending young Jean to a rarity of a grammar school for Finland in those days, one that taught in Finnish. The school introduced him to the national epic, the Kalevala, and this, together with the collection of folk literature made by Elias Lonnrot, were sources of inspiration for Sibelius's music. Sibelius became a major force in Finnish musical life with the composition of the hour-long Kullervo symphony in 1891/2. It drew on Finnish mythology and with other nationalistic music he composed in the 1890s helped to keep alive the spirit of Finnish nationalism.

Other such music from this period includes *En Saga* and the Karelia music, both dating from 1893. The latter was composed in response to the Vipuri Students' Union's request for incidental music to a series of seven historical tableaux. Karelia was in those days part of eastern Finland, whereas today it forms part of Russia. From this score Sibelius made a suite of three pieces. The *Intermezzo* originally depicted Karelians passing in procession to offer tribute to a Lithuanian prince. The sombre *Ballad* portrayed a deposed ruler listening to a minstrel at Vipuri castle and makes use of folklore elements rather than quoting an actual Finnish melody. The *Alla Marcia* followed a call to battle and provides a stirring climax to the suite.

Programme notes: Ben Brickman

Symphony No.6 in F major, Opus 68, (Pastorale')

Ludwig Van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

I. Allegro ma non troppo: *Awakening of Cheerful Feelings upon Arrival in the Country*

- II. Andante molto mosso: *Scene by the Brook*
- III. Allegro: *Merry Gathering of the Country Folk*
- IV. Allegro: *Storm Movement*
- V. Allegretto: *Shepherd's Song. Glad and Thankful Feelings After the Storm*

Beethoven described his sixth symphony, written during the summers of 1807 and 1808, as 'an expression of feeling rather than painting'. Beethoven loved nature deeply and would impatiently await the early summer when he could escape to the village of Heligenstadt. It was here that he found peace and tranquillity after the strenuous Vienna Season, and where many themes for his music would be sketched in the notebook which he always carried on his country walks. Beethoven has aptly titled the movements of the symphony enabling the listener to grasp the great emotional experience from which the symphony originated. This moving inspiration has not, however, impeded the unfolding of the symphonic form. The symphony has five movements, the third, fourth and fifth of which grow out of and follow each other without a break.

The first movement, 'The awakening of happy feelings on arriving in the countryside', uses material of this movement and particularly the phrases for the first violins, to open the symphony's second movement – 'Scene by the brook'. In this movement, also in sonata form, the rhythmic 12/8 time establishes the sensation of the brook's rippling. Delicate and imaginative scoring suggests the sounds of nature, and in a coda are heard the songs of the nightingale (flute), quail (oboe), and cuckoo (clarinet).

The third movement represents 'Peasants Merrymaking', and a sensitively scored scherzo and a boisterous trio form this movement. The trumpets make their first appearance in the trio, and suggest a possible flaring of tempers in the midst of frivolity. In the fourth movement – 'A Thunderstorm', a sudden ominous rumbling is heard in the cellos and basses, indicating the approach of the storm. Heavy drops of rain patter downwards in the violins, and the storm abates only to return with renewed vigour, emphasised by the scream of the piccolo and the rolling of the drums. Eventually, the clouds begin to break, the thunder fades into the distance, and the first clarinet and then first horn leads straight into the finale.

The fifth movement is a 'Shepherds' hymn of thanksgiving after the storm', and as the storm dies away the woodwind indicate the return of sunshine, and the violins sing a hymn of thanksgiving. Several finely worked out episodes contrast with the main section before the symphony comes to a quiet close.

Programme notes: Anonymous

Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67

Ludwig van Beethoven

Allegro con brio

Andante con moto

Allegro (Scherzo and Trio) - leading to . . .

Allegro

Beethoven was working on both the Pastoral and C minor symphonies in 1807–8. Although this is remarkable considering their differences, they share striking similarities too. The structure and shape of their movements are closely similar, and both possess a sense of drama

that transcends the concert hall and pushes the symphony halfway to theatre. Another similarity is the debt owed by both pieces to established traditions. There were conventions for pastoral-type music that Beethoven used in the Pastoral Symphony, and there were precedents for the Fifth Symphony in music by French revolutionary composers that expressed the progress from conflict to triumph.

Maynard Solomon suggests that the Fifth was a defiant response by a German patriot to humiliations suffered by the German states at Napoleon's hands. By the terms of the treaty of Tilsit, signed in 1807, Prussia was dismembered, and the lands between the Elbe and the Rhine were ceded to France. Many German writers and poets urged their countrymen not to despair but to prepare for liberation. Beethoven and many of his Viennese friends shared these anti-French sentiments including two of his patrons Prince Lobkowitz and Count Razumovsky, to whom the Fifth Symphony is dedicated.

Irrespective of circumstances surrounding its origins, what has come down to us is the ultimate expression in music of the human urge to conquer adversity. E.T.A. Hoffman, in his influential 1810 article on the Fifth, wrote of the profound feelings which it stirred within him: '... Beethoven's instrumental music opens up to us the world of the immense and infinite. Glowing rays of light blaze through the dark night of this world and we are made conscious of gigantic shadows which surge up and down gradually closing in on us and annihilating everything within us, except the torment of endless longing.'

The symphony opens with the most powerful and concentrated sonata-form movement ever written. Its mood of defiance and challenge recalls a letter where Beethoven wrote: 'I will seize fate by the throat it shall certainly not bend and crush me completely'. He throws down the gauntlet with the four-note motive so familiar to us all, and constructs his narrative mainly from this unifying feature of the whole work, for it is heard in various guises in all of the movements. Typical of Beethoven's middle period is the extended development section and the lengthy and stormy coda which provides yet more development, not a mere rounding off.

The 2nd movement *Andante con moto* is formally a set of variations on two themes; the first is introduced by violas and cellos, and the second by clarinets and bassoons. The movement is then strengthened by the whole orchestra introducing a martial mood. There are three variations on the two themes, their moods varying from confident to mysterious.

There now follows a continuous sequence of abstract music drama. Hoffman's 'dark night' and 'gigantic shadows' are characterised by a subdued groping figure leading nowhere until glowing rays of light blazed out by the horns dispel the aimlessness. The two figures alternate and intermingle until interrupted by a gruff dance led by the cellos and basses. Then, only the shadows return from the earlier section. The timpani and bass line suggest a nervous heartbeat, and only the first violins have any sense of direction until we emerge into the light and trombones, contrabassoon and piccolo suddenly appear, enriching the triumphant martial sound hammered out by full orchestra,

Programme notes: Ben Brickman

Several of these notes were supplied through the Programme Note Bank of Making Music, the National Federation of Music Societies, and from other sources.