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PART I

Reception history and aesthetics

1 An essay in post-colonial analysis: Sibelius as an icon of the Finns and others

Eero Tarasti

Introduction to the topics

In the twentieth century all Finns – not just musicologists – grew up amidst a Sibelius cult. In the 1970s and 1980s, attention focused on yet another Finnish “icon,” the Sibelius biographer Erik Tawaststjerna, the very incarnation of the Sibelius cult. When he spoke, one got the impression that the great master still dwelt among us, for Tawaststjerna appeared to be a direct link to the composer. When Tawaststjerna’s Sibelius biography was finally completed, Seppo Heikinheimo, the chief music critic for the *Helsingin Sanomat*, wrote that Sibelius was now a “picked bone.” But subsequent events have proven him wrong, for after Tawaststjerna came a new flurry of Sibelius studies, including many doctoral dissertations. The initial versions of many of the composer’s works were recorded for the first time, and there were Sibelius symposia, at first only in Finland, but soon in other important centers such as Paris, London, Berlin, and New York.

On their own, musicologists, record companies, and even illustrious conductors can neither create a national cult nor revive one. While Finland has always had a Sibelius cult, it has recently gained fresh momentum from the national turning inward of the 1990s. Patriotism has become fashionable, along with its accompanying national spectacles and ceremonies. A timely example of the renewed Sibelius cult was the concert series entitled “Sibelius in Memoriam” held in the fall of 1997 at the Kallio Church in Helsinki to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the composer’s death. For that event, Osmo Vänskä conducted the Lahti Symphony Orchestra in performances of all seven symphonies.

For a semiotician, the occasion had two significant dimensions. On the one hand, the musical signifiers afforded the ear a new and fresh experience; on the other, at the level of signifieds, one experienced a national spectacle of sorrow, as if Sibelius had just recently passed away. Newspapers publicized the concerts on black-gilt pages. The audience was placed before an altar above which hung a huge, candle-lit picture of the composer. Thus, the social-semiotic aspect bracketed the purely

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musical qualities in the signifiers, placing greatest emphasis on the signified, namely Sibelius as an iconic figure. The audience's identification with Sibelius simultaneously reinforced its sense of "Finnishness."

The fact is that we find ourselves at the center of a Sibelius cult. The reasons for this phenomenon, as I shall attempt to show, can be traced to colonialism – and post-colonialism as its continuation.¹ I first encountered ideas about colonialism years ago when studying the "Brazilian Sibelius," Heitor Villa-Lobos. One treatise on Latin American literature employs the term "the colonialized imagination" to indicate that Third-World people do not know how to appreciate their own achievements, leaders, and "icons"; instead, they put stock only in the values and models imported from outside their native lands (for example, from Europe). I believe that the term "colonialized" accurately describes certain phenomena in Finland, particularly the Finnish sense of national inferiority and worship of everything foreign. Since Europe can be divided into colonizers and colonized, there is no doubt to which category a country like Finland belongs. Thus, post-colonial theories apply not only to the so-called "Third World" but also to highly developed countries like Finland – a country that has been spiritually "colonialized" or trapped within a "colonialized imagination."

Colonialist models, which have profound implications for semiotics, are essentially based on the opposition between dominator and dominated. Taking discursive practices captive, the dominators occupy the *langue* of communication while the dominated are permitted to produce new *paroles* only within specified limits. Thus the dominator/dominated categories decisively influence the *langue* and *parole* of a culture. Since *parole* consists of signifiers and signifieds, the only way to erase the aforementioned dominance relationship is to create radically new signifiers and signifieds capable of "exploding" the colonialist scheme of communication.

The foregoing reflections have a place in my new theory of existential semiotics. The word "icon" in recent usage may refer to "cultural icons," who are persons or phenomena that have attained the status of "concepts" inasmuch as they have assumed a permanent place and significance in people's everyday thinking. In what follows, I present my own theory of the formation of icons in the recent, popularized sense of the term, believing that the Sibelius cult might yield itself to study from this perspective.

¹ "Post-colonialism" is a term used by Jean Franco in *A Literary History of Spain* (London: Barnes and Noble, 1973), p. 3; see

my discussion in Tarasti, *Heitor Villa-Lobos. The Life and Works, 1887–1959* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 1995), p. 4.

5 *Sibelius as an icon of the Finns and others***Analysis of the Sibelius cult**

The Finnish Sibelius cult began with the first performance of the *Kullervo* Symphony in 1892. Although this cult became an essential part of Finnish national history, it has not been studied systematically.² The objective of Philip Donner and Juhani Similä was not to analyze the Sibelius myth as such, but only to investigate the composer as an ethno-musicological and musico-cultural phenomenon, since “his personality accumulates the crucial values of Finnish art music.”³ Yet their essay did not constitute a probing analysis, but rather a general mapping of the phenomenon.⁴ Among later studies, one finds Anni Heino’s analysis of the public image of Sibelius as represented in Finnish newspapers, and Matti Huttunen’s articles on Sibelius as a national figure.⁵ Naturally, the monumental history of music in Finland by Dahlström, Heiniö, and Salmenhaara discusses this side of Sibelius. The centrality of Sibelius is undeniable, and therefore the third volume of the history, written by Erkki Salmenhaara, presents a story in which the central plot consists of the composer’s various phases. Deviations into side plots occur, concerning events between Sibelius’s “heroic acts.” In the fourth volume, written by Mikko Heiniö, however, the narrative no longer focuses on Sibelius.⁶ The main protagonists are now other Finnish composers over whom Sibelius casts his “shadow.” Heiniö employs the word “shadow” in three contexts: first, when discussing Sibelius as the object of national reverence; second, his influence on Finnish composers; and third, the new Sibelius reception.

² Among efforts to do so was the project by Philip Donner and Juhani Similä on Sibelius as an idol, in which the authors used a method developed by the Finnish folklorist Matti Kuusi; see Donner and Similä, “Jean Sibelius – teollistumisajan musiikkimurroksen idolihaamo” (Jean Sibelius – an Idol Figure in the Transition of Music in the Period of Industrialism), in *Musiikkikulttuurin murros teollistumisajan Suomessa (The Transition of Music Culture in the Period of Industrialism)*, ed. Vesa Kurkela and Riitta Valkeila (Jyväskylä: Jyväskylä University Dept. of Music, series A: tutkielmia ja raportteja no. 1, 1982), pp. 33–49. According to Kuusi who is quoted on p. 18, “idols are wish figures, real or fictive, which personify what we dream of, admire, appreciate, aspire after, desire (or fear).”

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴ Furthermore, it irritated, among others, Erik

Tawaststjerna, who viewed the authors’ work as an attack on his own Sibelius biography.

⁵ See Anni Heino’s MA Thesis, “Kansallinen ja kansainvälinen Sibelius suomalaisessa julkisuudessa” (Tampere: Tampere University, 1999). Among studies by Matti Huttunen note the following: “The Canon’ of Music History and the Music of a Small Nation,” in *Music History Writing and National Culture*, ed. Urve Lippus (Tallinn: Institute of Estonian Language, 1995), and “How Sibelius Became a Classic in Finland,” in *Sibelius Forum. Proceedings from the Second International Jean Sibelius Conference. Helsinki, November 25–29, 1995*, ed. Veijo Murtomäki, Kari Kilpeläinen, and Risto Väisänen (Helsinki: Sibelius Academy, 1998).

⁶ See Mikko Heiniö, *Suomen musiikin historia, osa 4: Aikamme musiikki (Music History in Finland, vol. 4: Contemporary Music)* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1995), p. 64.

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In recent Finnish Sibelius reception, the personality cult metamorphosed into “abstract” form by focusing on the “immortal idea of the symphony.” In this, the dominated Finns directly adopted the canonized view of the dominating central European culture: the symphony was the summit of art music, it was “absolute” and hence of a higher order than programmatic music, and it was based upon immortal supra-historical thinking. Consequently, the “myth of the symphony” was transformed into the myth of “organicism,” which to date no one has analyzed in detail. The notion of organicism plays a central role in the writings of Joonas Kokkonen, and has increasingly informed academic discussions of the musical texts themselves.⁷

My primary focus is the reception of the composer in Finnish texts that portray him as an icon and idol. These sources often do not include visual “texts,” whose existence is laudably mentioned, however, by Donner and Similä.⁸ In what follows, I draw on certain verbal “topics” in texts dealing with Sibelius as an icon, examine them in the light of post-colonial musicology and semiotics, and conclude by briefly indicating how new perceptions of the signifiers might liberate us from the dominating/dominated relationships of post-colonial discourse.

Sibelius icons in Finland

Typical expressions of Sibelius iconization can be found in texts by Sulho Ranta, Martti Similä, Ilmari Krohn, and other contemporaries.⁹ In my view, it is crucial to perceive these icons in the dialectics of the categories “Sameness/Otherness.” Who are the “we” of music and arts, and who are the “others”? Ranta, a Finnish composer and fervent, Europe-oriented modernist in the 1920s, writes on Sibelius’s birthday in 1945 in a style understandable in the context of that memorial event:

We Finns are always aware of the greatness of Sibelius as the national composer . . . we understand as well his breadth as a composer, his universal view that recognizes no limits. Yet only the Finnish Sibelius is our Sibelius.¹⁰

⁷ See Joonas Kokkonen in his essay collection *Ihminen ja musiikki (Man and Music)*, ed. Kalevi Aho (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 1992), p. 59.

⁸ Well known is their analysis of a photograph that shows the baby Sibelius and his mother in a Madonna and child pose, made possible by retouching the photo to remove Sibelius’s sister! We do find exciting visual iconizations, such as the painting by Eemu Myntti that represents Sibelius as Väinämöinen, in which the composer’s

features are blended with those of the ancient Finnish god.

⁹ See Sulho Ranta’s essay “Jean Sibelius eurooppalaisena ja yleismaailmallisena ilmiönä” (“Jean Sibelius as a European and global phenomenon”), in *Sävelten valo ja varjoja: toinen kirja musiikista ja muusikoista* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1946), pp. 13–18, and Martti Similä’s booklet *Sibeliana* (Helsinki: Otava, 1945).

¹⁰ Ranta, “Jean Sibelius eurooppalaisena,” p. 11.

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In terms of the *langue* and *parole* of music, Ranta elsewhere recognizes the difficulty of transforming *parole* into a new *langue*. The dominated does not alter its subordinate position by creative acts solely within the framework of the dominant *langue*. Ranta writes about the difficulty of penetrating to the area of *langue*; typically, he underlines the nationality of the dominated:

Every nation, every country sees the great men of its art mostly as national artists and fighters . . . Nevertheless, the domains of the great artists are limitless. Shakespeare, Goethe, and Beethoven are great world citizens of art. Purely national art . . . does not easily become such a common property. Such an art has its own atmosphere, in which it grows in the easiest way and breathes most naturally. Yet even it has . . . possibilities of being accepted in very broad areas.¹¹

In Ranta's essay "Jean Sibelius as a European and global phenomenon" the life of the composer-hero follows a narrative scheme whereby the initial phase is constituted by the assumption of the dominant *langue*; the second phase is the production of one's own *parole* within its limits; and the last phase the creation of one's own *langue*. Ranta observes that "Fifty years ago Finland needed a Finnish composer, and Sibelius knew his place . . . the result was Finnish, national art. Only when we had been able to show Europe that distant Finland is a country that has its own culture, only then could even Sibelius be relieved [from bearing the national standard], sink his thoughts inward, and let the goals of his art carry him still further away."¹²

In Ranta's text, the most crucial act of the hero-idol is the legitimizing of his home country ("only when we had been able to show Europe," i.e. "the Other"). Throughout, Europe appears as the Other of the Finns – the Other which determines what is valuable and what is not. The acceptance of the German view of culture as innate Spirit (*Geist*), as a matter of inwardness (*Innigkeit*), is revealed by the conclusion that the new *langue* emerges only from a sinking into oneself. The new *langue* is not created by means of external activities such as manifestoes, schools, or outwardly dramatic acts, but by a turning or looking inward.¹³

¹¹ Ibid., p. 13.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See Richard Taruskin in his broad and brilliantly written study *Defining Russia Musically. Historical and Hermeneutical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). In his treatise, Taruskin also utilizes the concept of "the semiotic," by which he

understands corporeal meanings in music, especially when they reflect some oriental stereotypes. Similar "corporeality" in Sibelius could be sketched reflecting the Nordic or Finno-Ugric version of masculinity and virility in musical discourse – not to be confused with the Wagnerian sense of the term.

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Another *topos* is formed by personal meetings with the iconized figure, when even the slightest signifiers assume great iconic significance. Such was the case with Ranta, but more particularly with Martti Similä in his *Sibeliana*, published in 1945. In this book, every statement by the composer assumes monumental proportions, along with his every gesture and expression. When Similä, a pianist and conductor devoted to Sibelius's music, played the Piano Sonata (perhaps somewhat overdramatically) at Sibelius's home in Ainola, the master looked keenly at him and said: "I wonder whether you understand me when I say that my style is ascetic."¹⁴ The story continues:

We sipped mocha and smoked our Havanas in all quietness. Then suddenly, almost as if mid-thought, [Sibelius] stood up and walked vehemently, sometimes from one corner of the room to the other. This was truly not the jovial pondering of an old priest. No, like a lion did he step.¹⁵

Similä spins out the mythologization of Sibelius's music with a type of discourse that was very common at that time:

As the background of his seven symphonies there is the deserted nature of the North, and at the same time an austere and mild, autumnal gray, or the reflections of the calm beauty of a summer day. In the First and Second, and even in the Third Symphony, from this soil arises the heroic figure of the young master-composer, in the first two [symphonies] as strong, in the Third already much acquiesced, and in its final hymn, one might say, in the serenity of antiquity.¹⁶

Similä had no doubt that the hero of the symphony was the composer himself. Such a view was espoused not only in popular texts such as this, but also in academic discourse, as is well illustrated by the analyses of Ilmari Krohn.¹⁷

Krohn, a composer and musicologist, was the first to hold the chair of musicology at the University of Helsinki. His study *Der Stimmungsgehalt der Symphonien von Jean Sibelius* (1945) can be interpreted in the light of both colonialism and iconization. Krohn experiences the Second Symphony in particular as depicting Finland's struggle for independence and proposes that it be called the "Finlandia" or the "Suomi Symphony." He interprets motifs and tone colours as musical signifiers for the political battle in which "the Russian dominant power tried to deprive Finland of its autonomy and free cultural development." In Krohn's reading, the sym-

¹⁴ Similä, *Sibeliana*, p. 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁷ Ilmari Krohn was the leading Finnish musicologist until the 1950s. See particularly

his *Der Stimmungsgehalt der Symphonien von Jean Sibelius*, 2 vols. (Helsinki: Suomalaisen tiedeakatemia toimituksia, Sarja B, nos. 57–58, 1945–46).

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phony predicts the liberation of the Fatherland with the help of German brothers-in-arms. For Krohn, music thus has the ability to forecast social events, a view nowadays held by many.¹⁸

According to Krohn the main key of D major, “As the dominant of the dominant . . . represents higher activity than the general referential key of C major, and its symbolic color, intensified yellow [*potenzierte gelbe Farbe*], fits well with the [symphony’s] expression, which depicts fervent patriotism.”¹⁹ Thus, Krohn views musical signifiers as if they existed within a ready-made framework. Elsewhere, he compares the Second Symphony with the First, noting that when Sibelius adopts the necessary compositional technique – the *langue*, as we would say – then the difference in his subsequent symphonies must appear on the level of the contents – or in the *parole*. Every master achieves more certainty in the technical sense by mastering the *langue*. The better he can handle it, the less effort the work of composition requires.²⁰

In Krohn’s writings there is no doubt about what constitutes the *langue* of music, which he describes in his monumental treatise on musical form. Musical *langue*, in his view, is a neutral way to express ideological and aesthetic ideas. By taking this position, he assumes an anti-colonialist stance. But when he reduces the Sibelian text to a Wagnerian *leitmotif* table and a straitjacket of strictly metrical analysis, he betrays a very “Germanic” attitude. In other words, what he wins in content, at the level of the signified, he loses elsewhere, at the level of his own discourse. In sum, despite his efforts to be an anti-colonialist, his logic follows that of the dominating German culture. This impression is intensified by his dry, Germanic style of writing that allows no intuitive flights of fantasy. The very manner of unfolding the analysis in Krohn’s writing – or as the French put it, his *écriture* – that alone and in itself constitutes the taking of a certain position or standpoint. Krohn’s analysis of the Second Symphony culminates in a diagram in which every theme and section of the symphony is provided with its “signified”:

Introduction: *treues Tagewerk der tiefen Volksschichten (Strebemotiv)*
(faithful daily work of the lower classes, striving motive); the main phrase:

¹⁸ See Krohn’s discussion of Sibelius’s Second Symphony (*ibid.*, pp. 120–227); also Jacques Attali, in his treatise *Noise. The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1985).

¹⁹ Krohn published in 1911–37 his monumental treatise of music theory, which established his method of music analysis for several decades in Finland; it was based on the

idea of musical form stemming from the smallest rhythmic units to large-scale musical forms, leading into similar schemes bar-by-bar, as in Alfred Lorenz’s analyses of the same time. See Krohn, *Musiikinteorian oppijakso (A Course in Music Theory)* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1911, 1916, 1923, 1927 and 1937).

²⁰ See Krohn, *Der Stimmungsgehalt der Symphonien*, pp. 125 and 149.

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Fremde Kultur der Oberschicht (Ziermotiv und Blütemotiv) (alien culture of the upper classes, decoration motif and blossoming motif); transition: *vereinigende Liebe zum Vaterland (Mahnmotiv und Vaterlandsmotiv)* (unifying love for the Fatherland, exhortation motif and Fatherland motif); subordinate theme: national awakening (*Weckrufmotiv und Funkenmotiv*) (awakening call motif and spark motif) [. . .] Development: awakening of the national consciousness (*Aufbruchsmotiv*) (“surging forth” motif) into the diligent striving in all disciplines of the cultural life, etc.²¹

By contrast, in retrospect, some texts seem to be completely free from the iconization of their object, although they were interpreted as such in their time. One of them is Bengt von Törne’s *Sibelius: A Close Up*, published in English in 1937.²² Törne’s work sparked one of the most (in)famous anti-iconizations of Sibelius, Theodor Adorno’s review of Törne’s book, (1938).²³ What in von Törne’s tiny book could have ignited Adorno’s rage? In fact, Törne’s style is astonishingly objective compared to the overt mythologizing of other Finns. The book relates encounters between von Törne and Sibelius, and these reports do not idolize Sibelius more than is usual when a young composer meets an older *maestro*. Von Törne writes:

I had had the unique opportunity of being in touch with a man who at every moment gives one the impression of a great genius. But Sibelius has nothing of the rigidity which is peculiar to the characters of Corneille’s or Racine’s tragedies. He is more akin to Shakespeare’s heroes: at the same time human, great and humorous.²⁴

One of Adorno’s primary arguments was directed against the notion that Sibelius’s closeness to nature could dictate his compositional style. When von Törne, arriving in Finland from the Baltic sea, described the landscape, Sibelius replied: “And when we see those granite rocks, we know why we are able to treat the orchestra as we do.”²⁵ Later, this statement would be transmuted into an iconizing form in the obituary by Yrjö Kilpinen: “So is Jean Sibelius’s life-work like a mighty lighthouse standing on the solid granite rock of Finland, a lighthouse whose bright radiance is

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 152–53.

²² Bengt von Törne was one of the very few pupils of composition Sibelius ever had. Therefore his remarks have a certain value although they were modified by his own aesthetic views. See Törne, *Sibelius: A Close Up* (London: Faber, 1937); in Finnish *Sibelius: Lähikuvia ja keskusteluja* (Helsinki: Otava, 1945/65).

²³ Theodor Adorno’s hostility toward Sibelius was ideological (basing his views on the “progressive” in music history), practical (he

was a friend of Alma Mahler and wanted to promote Mahler as the great proponent of the symphonic tradition in the twentieth century), and musical (he was unable to grasp Sibelius’s radically new musical language). His critique appears without a title in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 7 (1938), pp. 460–63; repr. in two further collections; see note 4 on page xii.

²⁴ Törne, *Sibelius: A Close Up*, p. 100.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

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seen everywhere in the world.”²⁶ According to such “musical progressivists” as Adorno, music could not be based on a return to “nature,” since in music even nature is negated by culture to become a *zweite Vermittlung*, i.e., a form of mediation. His reasoning approaches the position of semiotics, in the sense that cultural texts are always arbitrary and conventional “social constructions” that cannot be based upon or justified by appeals to a “nature” that motivates compositions in a directly indexical way. The problem is that Adorno employs Hegelian-semiotic logic tendentiously, in the manner of the dominating culture, as did his ideal composer, Schoenberg. He did not accept the proposition that for any composer, even Stravinsky, nature could provide the source of aesthetics. In his shortsighted conjectures about aesthetics, Adorno proves himself to be an adherent of colonialist discourse, although his persuasive rhetorical style often conceals this fact.

What probably irritated Adorno even more was Sibelius’s negative judgements about those other “gods,” Richard Wagner and Gustav Mahler, who had been canonized by the dominant German tradition. Von Törne (presumably reflecting Sibelius’s opinion) says about Mahler: “He certainly aspired at vast epic perspectives, and his intentions are supported by an unflinching technical skill and experience. Yet all these undoubtedly great qualities avail him nothing, for there is no life in these gigantic works, conceived as they are without inspiration.”²⁷ Additionally, he quotes Sibelius’s criticisms of Wagner’s heavy-handed rhetorical style, adding that there is in music nothing further removed from the character of Sibelius than Wagner’s overloaded baroque: “Sibelius’s personal dislike of him is further increased by the conviction that the influence of that master and his whole school has been disastrous to the evolution of music.”²⁸ Sibelius even said, according to von Törne, that “Wagner reminds me of his former friend and later antagonist Nietzsche, who always suggests a butler who has been created a baron.”²⁹ These anti-Wagner statements anticipate later negative Wagner reception in Finland, many composers considering it their duty to take the same position as Sibelius (see, e.g., Kokkonen’s writings). Even the third volume of the new *Music History in Finland* echoes Sibelius’s position: “Wagner fever was a disease from which only a few musicians of the turn of century were spared. Likewise, Sibelius had his own Wagner crisis.”³⁰

²⁶ The Finnish Lieder composer Yrjö Kilpinen in his obituary of Jean Sibelius in the newspaper *Uusi Suomi*, 1 October 1957.

²⁷ Törne, *Sibelius: A Close Up*, pp. 74–75.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Erkki Salmenhaara in his part of the *Suomen musiikin historia* vol. 3 (Helsinki: WSOY, 1995), p. 98.