

# Sibelius: Symphony No. 5



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*Introduction: Sibelius and the problem of 'modernism'*

It is customary for historians to draw a line between Sibelius's dissonant, austere Fourth Symphony (1911) and the seemingly more accessible, comfortable Fifth (whose three versions received their premieres in 1915, 1916, and 1919). The gap often alleged to separate the two symphonies is that dividing the spirit of artistic 'progress' in the earlier work from its presumed absence in the later. However simplistic, the line has served to divide a generally legitimate earlier Sibelius, whose works may be approached without apology (especially the earlier ones, which can be conveniently, though reductively, collapsed into the somewhat tainted category of 'nationalism'), from a problematic, post-Fourth Symphony composer, whose idiosyncratic works clung to an eclipsed symphonic tradition in markedly anti-Romantic times.

Commentators have consequently embraced the Fourth Symphony, which in its uncompromising stance has traditionally been considered the most forward-looking of Sibelius's seven. The Fifth's more overt orchestral effects, triumphant conclusion, and popular appeal have required a bit of dodging, even for champions of the later works. 'The fifth symphony, with its imposing finale and heroic proportions', wrote Constant Lambert in 1934, 'might at first sight seem to be a mature reversion to an earlier mood, and it may be described as the most obviously great of Sibelius' symphonies. Actually, though, it is not a backward step but a gradual approach to the one monumental movement of *No. 7*.<sup>1</sup> In such a scheme the Fifth, while subtly mixing progressive and regressive elements, is reduced to a way-station on the path to worthier things: the last two symphonies and *Tapiola*. Equally common, though, has been the suggestion that serious historians, if they are to bother with Sibelius at all, need not trouble themselves with the post-1911 works. Thus Carl Dahlhaus, writing sympathetically in 1980 of the Fourth: '[Here] Sibelius reached a "state of [the] musical material" (to borrow a phrase from his detractor, Adorno) which he was never to surpass, not even in his Seventh Symphony

(1924).<sup>2</sup> Dahlhaus's point is nothing less than that after the Fourth Symphony Sibelius's music no longer belongs to 'history'.

In short, in many of the standard historical accounts the Fifth Symphony is Sibelius's *Der Rosenkavalier*, as the Fourth had been his *Elektra*. And just as has been the case with Strauss, it has been our assessment of the later work that has determined the main lines of our reconstruction of his career's trajectory: we tend both to retroject back and to project forward from the implications of the Fifth. It is the Fifth, then, not the Fourth, that occupies the pivotal point in Sibelius's output. Not surprisingly, of the completed symphonies it is the one over whose final shape he seems most to have struggled. (I except here the much-discussed Eighth Symphony, on which he apparently laboured from late 1926 through at least 1933 or 1934 – but then withheld and ultimately, it seems, destroyed by fire in the 1940s.)<sup>3</sup>

But again, as with Strauss, the Fifth's centrality to the Sibelius *œuvre* invites us to ponder difficult historical problems. Chief among them is that of a notable, *engagé* composer facing, but then apparently renouncing, the most advanced 'state of the musical material' of his time. By the period of the Fifth Symphony this included, most prominently, the aggressive 'emancipation of the dissonance'. Considered more broadly, the larger challenge was the attempt by younger radicals to delegitimize the expressive worlds that had been supported by the musical systems of Western European bourgeois liberalism for the past several decades. The socio-aesthetic dynamics at issue here are far-reaching in their implications. In order to perceive them we need to view more expansively the workings of a complex aesthetic institution.

Sibelius's output is best viewed as a significant constituent of a larger 'modern' wave of European composers born around 1860, a generational wave that included Elgar (1857), Puccini (1858), Mahler (1860), Wolf (1860), Debussy (1862), Strauss (1864), Sibelius (1865), Glazunov (1865), Nielsen (1865), Busoni (1866), and several others. Our key category of understanding at the outset, then, is that of a self-conscious 'musical modernism', which, as Dahlhaus has repeatedly argued, flourished 'between 1889 and 1914 as a self-contained period in music history'. The modern style initially defined itself as something youth-oriented and new, as something signalled by 'the breakaway mood of the 1890s (a mood symbolized musically by the opening bars of Strauss's *Don Juan*) . . . a fresh start in a new direction'.<sup>4</sup> Musicians at the turn of the century were much absorbed with the challenges posed by 'the moderns', and their own descriptions of the movement – frequently grounded in their assessments of Richard Strauss – ranged from Hans Merian's view that its essential feature lay in the liberation away from the

architectonic in favour of ever more precise, colouristic effects to Oscar Bie's contention that modern music displayed an increased 'materialism', in which musical ideas were now spawned out of the implications of the technical material itself, instead of, as earlier, out of the reservoir of the human spirit.<sup>5</sup>

However we might choose to define this modernism, it is clear that the musical world that Sibelius's generation greeted differed significantly from that of its predecessors. This was the first generation to come of age in a post-Lisztian/post-Wagnerian world of recently reified or crystallized musical systems, whose very security and success could be understood to stand for a liberal, urbanized, and capitalistic Europe now nearing the crest of its own self-assurance. These in-place musical systems were the undisputed brokers of aesthetic power. We may regard them as coordinated on a broader level to constitute the epoch's 'institution of art music'.<sup>6</sup> They included fully-fledged, efficiently organized concert, recital, and operatic delivery systems supported by a network of entrepreneurs, performers, publishers, reviewers and critics, historians, educators, textbook-codified *Formenlehre* systems for composers to use as foils and points of reference, a fixed canon of past masterworks, and so on.

The 1889–1914 modernists sought to shape the earlier stages of their careers as individualistic seekers after the musically 'new', the bold, the controversial, and the idiosyncratic in structure and colour. But simultaneously, as sharp competitors in a limited marketplace, they were also eager to attract and then perpetuate the constituent parts of the delivery system. With few exceptions (the earlier Debussy may be one) their goal was to effect a relatively comfortable marriage between art and high-technology business. Within the *de facto* institution one strove to flourish as provocatively or enticingly as possible – to create an identifiable, personalized style that, while unmistakably emanating the aura, traditions, and high seriousness of 'art', also produced readily marketable commodities marked with an appropriately challenging, up-to-the-minute spice, boldness, or 'philosophical tone'. In short, one was encouraged to push the system to its socio-aesthetic limits, but not beyond them, as would be the case with the younger radicals.

Within the format of symphonic composition, Strauss, Mahler, and Sibelius number among this generation's major figures. From Sibelius's perspective the first two, as products of Austro-Germanic training and culture – 'native speakers', as it were – would have been more or less insiders, that is, active participants situated in social positions of non-ignorable prestige, power, and influence. (Admittedly, the actual situation was more complex, particularly when we consider such other aspects of social and racial tension as may be

found, for example, in the reception of Mahler's career. Still, the point at hand is that, whatever the musical or personal judgments of individual contemporary critics and historians might have been, they rarely questioned Strauss's or Mahler's basic right of entry into the centre of symphonic discourse: one was obliged to take a stand on them, whether pro or con.)<sup>7</sup> Sibelius, correctly enough, saw himself viewed as an outsider, as a composer who from the Germanic cultural-political perspective was patronizable – or could be ignored entirely – as 'not one of us'. Walter Niemann's emphatic, if not phobic, dismissal of Sibelius's symphonies in 1917 was, among other things, a priestlike gesture within the cultic institution intended to keep pure the sacred space of Germanic symphonism. Thus Sibelius's symphonies were merely 'Northern': their thematic essence was foreign to 'a symphonic treatment in our sense . . . [that of] true symphonic creation – monumentality and closure of form, organic and logical development and shaping'; they impressed one as struggles over 'the imitation, perhaps, of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* in a Finnish dialect'; moreover, 'from the first to the last [symphony], their content is the same: Finland's soul in its nature and people'.<sup>8</sup> This fundamental cultural otherness shaped the reception of Sibelius's music on the continent. But from a broader perspective all three – doubtless along with Elgar, and probably Nielsen and Glazunov as well – should be considered the principal symphonic representatives of a generation that faced the same kinds of compositional and institutional challenges, however their individual solutions might have differed.

In the most general terms, the compositional careers of most of the moderns may be divided into two phases. The first, the active or competitive phase, is characterized by the forging of differently accented, individualized languages from the mid 1880s through, roughly, the first decade of the twentieth century. For each composer this was a phase of personal stylization to be defined through a persistent, aggressive stretching of established compositional norms. Because of the premium placed on originality, the moderns were hesitant to lapse into an unconsidered reliance on 'default' structural, melodic, or harmonic gestures. Thus, forging a personalized but marketable style around 1900 was a complicated, risky business. Such canon- and textbook-consecrated gestures as melodic simplicity, squarely periodic phrasing, frequent cadences and balanced resolutions, symmetrical recapitulations, essentially unaltered repetitions of phrases or sections, and harmonic, tonal, structural, or orchestral orthodoxy needed to be handled with great care. An overuse, or even a misplaced use, of such defaults (one that

could strike the listener as aesthetically unaware of its own datedness) opened one to the charge of merely perpetuating an inconsequential epigonism. On the other hand, within the modern style it was entirely legitimate, and quite normal, to evoke traditional or antiquated gestures in a non-immediate way. For example, an 'old-world' melody or turn of phrase could be set forth 'as if in quotation marks' or as a retrospective evocation of a not-quite-graspable, naive, or pre-modern wholeness remembered or dreamt of, but now fading rapidly or inaccessible in current times. (Although their individual styles and intentions differed markedly, Mahler and Elgar, in particular, would be attracted to this technique.)

Even entire structures could receive this quotation-mark treatment. A central feature of the modernist aesthetic game – one in which Sibelius was an eager player – was implicitly or fragmentarily to refer to the generic formal conventions, perhaps as lost gestures or the founding gestures of the game, but then to override them. By the last third of the nineteenth century there had arisen a whole arsenal of what I have termed 'deformations' of the *Formenlehre* (standard-textbook) structures.<sup>9</sup> Certain 'sonata-deformational' procedures became both common and readily recognizable. To perceive many modern works appropriately we should not try to take their measure with the obsolete 'sonata' gauge, as is often attempted, but rather to understand that they invoke familiar, 'post-sonata' generic subtypes that have undergone, in various combinations, the effects of differing deformational procedures. These structures cannot be said to 'be' sonatas in any strict sense: this would be grossly reductive, and in the consideration of any such work nuances are everything. Still, as part of the perceptual framework within which they ask to be understood, they do depend on the listener's prior knowledge of the *Formenlehre* 'sonata'. A significant part of their content, that is, is in dialogue with the generic expectations of the sonata, even when some of the most important features of those expectations are not realized.

By the later nineteenth century the most prominent deformational procedures seem to have stemmed from key works of Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Liszt, and Wagner, although certain structures of Beethoven, Weber, Schubert, and Chopin were by no means irrelevant. Although an adequate discussion of late-century sonata deformations would lead us even further afield, it should be mentioned that the various types were shared by all of the symphonic modernists, who apparently played off each other's solutions. Some of the most common deformation-procedure families – and we should note once again that any single musical structure may combine aspects of two or more families – include:



- 1 *The breakthrough deformation.* Here an unforeseen inbreaking of a seemingly new (although normally motivically related) event in or at the close of the ‘developmental space’ radically redefines the character and course of the movement and typically renders a normative, largely symmetrical recapitulation invalid. The breakthrough principle is a notable member of a set of strategies that seek to avoid a potentially redundant recapitulation. Its roots go back to such things as the first-movement portion of Schumann’s Fourth Symphony, whose developmental space, in effect, turns its back on the generically well-behaved exposition in ways that have profound consequences for the rest of the work. Clear examples within ‘modern’ works, which are generally more eruptive, may be drawn from the first movement and finale of Mahler’s First Symphony, the second movement of Mahler’s Fifth along with the first movement of his Eighth, and Strauss’s *Don Juan* and *Death and Transfiguration*.<sup>10</sup> As we shall see, Sibelius alludes to the breakthrough principle in the Fifth Symphony’s first movement.
- 2 *The introduction-coda frame.* This procedure gives the effect of subordinating ‘sonata-activity’ to the overriding contents of an encasing introduction and coda (whose identity may also intrude into certain inner sections of the ‘sonata’). A common result is the furnishing of two levels of aesthetic presence, for example (as often in works with a ‘national’ turn), that of a fuller, more emphatic framing-reality – or even that of a metaphorically ‘present’ narrator – which unfolds a subordinate sonata-process that is eventually absorbed back into the original, fuller presence at its end. Wagner’s Overture to *Tannhäuser* seems to have provided an influential example (one that also contains a notably sonata-deformational interior),<sup>11</sup> and the procedure also occurs in virtually model formats in the initial movements of Tchaikovsky’s Second, Glazunov’s Fourth, and Elgar’s First Symphonies. Earlier, generally less developed examples include (in embryo) Mendelssohn’s Overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and (more emphatically) several overtures of Berlioz and the first movements of Schubert’s Ninth and Mendelssohn’s ‘Scottish’ Symphonies.<sup>12</sup> The finale of Brahms’s First also shares affinities with this family, as does, on a somewhat reduced scale, the first movement of Dvořák’s Eighth.
- 3 *Episodes within the developmental space.* Here the space normally allotted to development is partially or wholly given over to one or more – but often a pair of – episodes, which may or may not be motivically related to material

heard earlier. Developmental spaces with interpolated single episodes may be found in Weber's *Euryanthe* Overture, Wagner's *Tannhäuser* Overture, and Brahms's *Tragic* Overture. More thoroughgoing instances feature two episodes that extend over most of the developmental space, as in Berlioz's *Les franc-juges* Overture (possibly),<sup>13</sup> Liszt's *Tasso*, Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll*, and, within the 'modern' style, several of Strauss's symphonic poems, including *Macbeth*, *Don Juan*, and *Death and Transfiguration*.<sup>14</sup>

- 4 *Various strophic/sonata hybrids*. These occur occasionally in Mahler: the finale of the *Resurrection* Symphony (three broad, multithematic strophes simultaneously articulating a sonata deformation, or vice-versa) and the opening and closing movements of *Das Lied von der Erde* spring to mind. The Sibelian process that I shall identify in chapters 3–5 below as 'rotational form' is a member of this general family of deformational procedures. Perhaps significantly, some of the clearest precedents – including the first movement of Beethoven's *Appassionata* Sonata and the finale of Mendelssohn's 'Scottish' Symphony (both with 'four strophes' of a first/second theme-pattern) – are also early examples of 'formal' sonata movements that lack the important expositional repeat. (Within orchestral, non-concerto genres early in the century, the expositional repeat was to be omitted in operatic or concert overtures, but not in symphonies.) In addition, several idiosyncratic early fusions of the strophic and sonata principles are to be found in Berlioz: in the second portion of the first movement of *Harold in Italy*, for instance, or in the invigoratingly anarchic (and indeed quintessentially carnivalesque) overture, *Le Carnaval Romain*.<sup>15</sup>
- 5 *Multimovement forms in a single movement*, as so often in Liszt, Strauss, Schoenberg, and middle and late Sibelius. (See chapter 3 below, 'Interrelation and fusion of movements'.) Obvious sources earlier in the century are Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* and Schumann's Fourth Symphony. Wagner's Overture to *Die Meistersinger* has also been claimed as a compact precedent.<sup>16</sup>

These deformational procedures – along with several others<sup>17</sup> – are readily perceivable as norms within the first, active phase of liberal-bourgeois modernism. The second phase retains them, but its general expressive tone is now one either of disillusioned withdrawal from the 'progressive' marketplace or of the last-ditch – but doomed – defence of a beleaguered fortress. For each modernist the second phase was initiated by a personal confrontation with the more radical musical challenges of the years 1907–14,

led mostly by two younger figures, one from the 1870s, Schoenberg, the other from the 1880s, Stravinsky. These were years in which the landscape of the institution of art music was undergoing nothing short of an earthquake. Suddenly outflanked, each of the moderns (particularly the symphonic or Germanic-oriented group) felt the ground slipping from under his feet. Within a few years an unforeseen historical twist – the onset of the New Music from a younger generation – was turning what had been perceived as aggressively modern into something faded and *passé*, something too snugly wedded to the old-world, liberal institutions of music and the aesthetically cultivated sectors of the middle class (*Bildungsbürgertum*) that they had sought to engage. The offence was suddenly put on the defence.

A mid-career decision was consequently forced upon each composer of the 1855–65 generation. And to a person, each declined to endorse – much less to embrace – the musical revolutions of Schoenberg and Stravinsky, even though each, quite accurately, perceived them as watershed events that brought the competitive phase of his own modern project to an end. Dahlhaus writes, for instance, of ‘Strauss’s and Reger’s [ultimate] rejection of modernism . . . [which was] obviously influenced if not directly occasioned by the shock of Schönberg’s earliest atonal compositions’.<sup>18</sup> As we shall see, Sibelius had precisely the same experience, and we would doubtless be obliged to think of Mahler in similar terms had he lived a decade or two longer: it hardly seems likely that he would have followed the Schoenberg School’s lead into full atonality.

For each composer who survived into the second decade of the century, the withdrawal phase commonly involved a reflection on the nature of a grand but rapidly obsolescing musical language. We are thus presented with a charged dialectic of figure and ground that ought not to be resolved too hastily. On the one hand, the existing, in-place liberal-bourgeois institution of concert music provided the *de facto* framework of understanding – or ground – for the radical New Music (although this need not have been made explicit on that music’s surface); on the other, the tacit presupposition of the now-withdrawing modernists was the presence of a new, aggressive musical language that was eclipsing their own. We might be encouraged, then, to listen to early atonal Schoenberg with the tonal, expressive, and structural horizons of expectation provided by the systems of liberal-bourgeois modernism. Conversely, we might listen to the post-1910 Sibelius, Strauss, Elgar, and so on, by realizing that these composers are deeply aware of using a language that does not bring to its acoustic surface the ‘state of the musical material’. Nevertheless, that ‘state of the material’ does exist as a precondition of both

musical production and reception: no composer can dismiss his or her aesthetic context by sheer fiat. Moreover, this awareness can be very much what such music is 'about'. In this deeper sense the 'state of the musical material' *is* present in such works, although it may not be foregrounded into explicit sound.

Broadly construed, this generational crisis is the foremost historical problem in which Sibelius and the Fifth Symphony are implicated. Our principal tasks will be to locate that work – and some of its immediate predecessors – within the tensions of the modernist/New Music confrontation, and then to inquire whether, and to what extent, we can uncover the historical content embedded in the language and structure of the Fifth Symphony itself.