

WEST VALLEY SYMPHONY
FIRE AND FJORD
DANIEL WILEY, MUSIC DIRECTOR/CONDUCTOR
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PROGRAM NOTES

Danish composer **Carl Nielsen** (1865 - 1931) wrote his *Symphonic Rhapsody* in 1888. It was originally intended as the first movement of a symphony, but Nielsen never composed the whole symphony. The *Rhapsody* was first performed five years later on February 26, 1893 and was conducted by Victor Bendix. Prior to that first performance, Nielsen wrote in his diary: "To a rehearsal of my symphonic movement for the People's Concert. The piece has been given the title 'Symphonic Rhapsody'. It sounds fine, and although it now seems naive to me, there is still so much of my own and such a good attitude in the piece that I think it is rather good all the same." After the performance he wrote: "My piece went very nicely and was fairly successful; but the audience obviously expected that more should follow, and for once were right. The piece is not suitable for standing alone." Nielsen made no effort to have the *Symphonic Rhapsody* performed again.

Edvard Grieg (1843 – 1907) was by nature a miniaturist. His musical gifts were ideally suited to short pieces for piano, songs, and shorter orchestral works. His rhapsodic nature didn't function well within the larger musical structure of the symphony or concerto. Hence, he left very little large-scaled music. Paradoxically, the work for which he is best known in the concert hall is one of those large works: the Piano Concerto in A minor, composed in 1868. Its musical viewpoint is typically nineteenth-century Romantic, with a good amount of Brahms and Schumann thrown in.

The concerto was dedicated to pianist Edmund Neupert who first played it in Copenhagen on April 3, 1869. After the premier, Neupert wrote to Grieg, "On Saturday your divine Concerto resounded in the great hall of the Casino. The triumph I achieved was tremendous. Even as early as the cadenza in the first movement the public broke into a real storm. The three dangerous critics, Gade, Rubinstein and Hartmann, sat in the stalls and applauded with all their might. I am to send you greeting from Rubinstein and say that he is astounded to have heard a composition of such genius..."

Jean Sibelius (1865 – 1957) began composing his Second Symphony in D major during the spring of 1901 in Italy, and completed it in Finland before the year was out.

The first performance was conducted by the composer on March 8, 1902 in the University Hall in Helsinki. It was ecstatically received by the audience which led to repeat, and sold-out, performances on March 10th, 14th and 16th. The 2nd quickly made its way around the world and into the standard repertoire. Reviewers were unanimous in their praise. Critic Karl Flodin described the symphony as “a definitive masterpiece, one of the few symphonic creations of our time that points in the same direction as Beethoven’s symphonies.” The symphony was dedicated to Sibelius’s close friend, mentor, and sometimes-benefactor, Axel Carpelan.

For English critic Cecil Gray the Second was revolutionary; it was the “beginning of a new line and contains the germs and immense and fruitful development.” On the surface the work would seem to conform to the traditional four-movement formula of *allegro, andante, scherzo, finale*; but the internal organization of the movements reveals many important innovations, amounting at times, and particularly in the first movement, to a veritable revolution, and to the introduction of an entirely new principle into symphonic form.”

Sibelius’ innovation was to turn symphonic development on its head. Gray writes: “Instead of presenting definite, clear-cut, melodic personalities in the exposition, taking them to pieces, dissecting and analyzing them in a development section, and putting them together in the recapitulation, which is roughly speaking the method of most nineteenth-century practitioners of symphonic form, Sibelius inverts the process. The peculiar strength and attraction of this method of construction consists in the fact that it is the method of nature and of life itself; Sibelius most characteristic movements are born, develop, and die, like all living things.”

Robert Kajanus, the noted Sibelius interpreter, wrote an article after the premiere which is grossly misleading. Kajanus claimed that the stirring symphony was “a portrayal of the Finnish people’s resistance to their increasingly dominant Russian overlords.” It later was even named the “Liberation Symphony”. Sibelius put those suggestions to rest in an interview given in December, 1934, and disclaimed programmatic intentions in any of his symphonies: “My symphonies are music conceived and worked out in terms of music and with no literary basis. I am not a literary musician; for me music begins where words cease...the germ and the fertilization of my symphonies have been solely musical.”

~~~Marty Haub