

***Swan of Tuonela, Op. 22, No. 2***

**Jean Sibelius (1865–1957)**

Written: 1895

Movements: One

Style: Romantic

Duration: Ten minutes

Art is an important means for shaping a people's national identity. In the nineteenth century, music contributed significantly to the building of nations. For Finland, long under the dominion of either Sweden or Russia, the move began in 1835 when Elias Lönnrot—ironically himself a Swede—published the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*. It was the seed of national identity that eventually led to Finland's independence from Russia in 1917.

Jean Sibelius read the *Kalevala* as a child. He based his first significant instrumental work, the massive five-movement *Kullervo* on it. Next, he began an opera based on the *Kalevala* called *The Building of the Boat*. He decided that tone poems—instrumental music that tells a story—was much more to his liking, so he abandoned the project

Work on the opera didn't go to waste, however. He included ideas from it in a suite of four tone poems that he began writing in 1894. Once again, *Kalevala* served as the inspiration. The main character in all four pieces is one of the heroes in the *Kalevala*, Lemminkäinen. He is a Finnish Don Juan, who abandons his young wife and goes to the island of Saari, where he frolics with the young maidens. Next he goes to Tuonela where he attempts to shoot a swan to win the mistress of the Northland. Instead, he dies—only to be brought back to life by his mother. Describing the nationalist character of the suite, Sibelius said, "I think we Finns ought not to be ashamed to show more pride in ourselves. That is the underlying theme throughout . . . Lemminkäinen is just as good as the noblest of earls. He is an aristocrat."

Originally the overture to *The Building of the Boat*, *The Swan of Tuonela* is the second of the four tone poems. He described it in the score: "Tuonela . . . the Hell of Finnish mythology, is surrounded by a large river with black waters and a rapid current, on which the Swan of Tuonela floats majestically, singing."

Virtually a solo for English horn and strings, the atmosphere is static. Except for a brief moment in a major key, the mood is almost despondent.

***Concerto No. 2 in A Major for Piano and Orchestra***

**Franz Liszt (1811–1886)**

Written: 1839, revised 1849–61

Movements: One

Style: Romantic

Duration: 22 minutes

If you had to identify one pivotal musician from the middle of the nineteenth century, it would have to be Franz Liszt. From his influence as a pianist and composer to his vigorous

support of political, social and artistic change; from his association with the musical “giants” of his day to his earnestly-flouted affairs with the wives of the aristocratic elite; from his prodigious first concert to his final performance at the age of 75, Liszt seems to have been everywhere, done everything and known everyone.

Residing at the top of the piano world, Liszt had as many detractors as proponents. Sometimes praise and condemnation came from the same source. Felix Mendelssohn felt that he played with “such a pitiably imperfect style, so uncleanly, so ignorantly, that I could have listened to many a middling pianist with more pleasure.” On the other hand, he wrote, “I have not seen any musician in whom musical feeling ran, as in Liszt, into the very tips of the fingers and there streamed out immediately.”

The *Piano Concerto No. 2* is in one movement, a form Liszt preferred over the Classical three-movement model of most concertos. In form and style it is quite similar to his orchestral tone poems. One critic wrote, “Had Liszt seen fit to give the concerto a poetic or dramatic title, it might have been something like *“The Life of and Adventures of a Melody.”*”

The clarinet introduces that melody which immediately sets off on its “adventure.” Along the way, it transforms rhythmically, changes from major to minor, and goes from quiet and lyrical to loud and forceful. Soon it encounters a wild, threatening second theme—a presence that will return periodically to further alter the course of the original melody. The melody returns unaltered in the solo cello, accompanied now by the piano. This beautiful middle section continues with solos in the oboe and first violins until interrupted again by the second theme, which manages to have its way until the climactic return of the melody disguised as a march. After a display of musical fireworks by the piano, the second theme tries to return; but in the end, the now-heroic melody prevails.

### ***Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 43***

**Jean Sibelius (1865–1957)**

Written: 1901

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 43 minutes

Jean Sibelius wrote his symphonies at a time when writing “pure” music was unfashionable. Throughout his life, Sibelius obliged by writing tone poems—music that told a story or “meant something.” But he held the line with his symphonies: “My symphonies are music conceived and worked out solely in terms of music, with no literary basis . . . a symphony should be music first and last.”

In his *Second Symphony*, Sibelius turns the standard form for a first movement on its head. Instead of presenting a few main themes in an exposition, he begins with what sounds like bits and pieces of themes. He breaks them into even smaller bits in the development. It is only at the climax of this generally pastoral movement that we get a full-blown theme.

Cellos and basses begin the second movement with a gentle, walking *pizzicato* (plucking of strings). The bassoons play the first theme over this. It contains a curious blues-like

inflection. The oboes join in, then the strings, and finally the brass as a climax develops which suddenly breaks off. After a silence, the strings begin a second, hymn-like melody. This, too, develops to a climax and breaks off. The development concerns itself primarily with the first theme. The hymn comes back again, but in a dark minor with threatening brass. The walking pizzicato returns. This time the whole orchestra plays above it. A final brass climax closes the movement.

The third movement is a blistering scherzo for the strings. The trio section features a beautiful melody played by the oboe and accompanied by clarinets and horns. With a blast from the trumpets, the scherzo bursts back in. A second statement of the trio leads to a transition into the last and glorious movement. It seems the whole symphony has been building towards the opening theme of the finale. The flutes and oboes play a quiet second theme over gentle, but incessantly murmuring, strings. The development section works primarily with bits from the first theme. It inexorably builds to a climax and a full restatement of both the principal themes. This time, as the second theme builds, its minor quality changes to major – leading to a glorious close.

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