

J. Sibelius, Pelléas et Mélisande Suite, Op. 46



Jean Sibelius (8 December 1865 – 20 September 1957) was a Finnish composer of the later Romantic period whose music played an important role in the formation of the Finnish national identity. His mastery of the orchestra has been described as "prodigious." The core of Sibelius's oeuvre is his set of seven symphonies. Like Beethoven, Sibelius used each successive work to further develop his own personal compositional style. His works continue to be performed frequently in the concert hall and are often recorded. In addition to the symphonies, Sibelius's best-known compositions include *Finlandia*, the *Karelia Suite*, *Valse triste*, the Violin Concerto in D minor and *The Swan of Tuonela* (one of the four movements of the *Lemminkäinen Suite*). Other works include pieces inspired by the Finnish national epic, the

Kalevala; over 100 songs for voice and piano; incidental music for 13 plays; the opera *Jungfrun i tornet* (The Maiden in the Tower); chamber music; piano music; Masonic ritual music; and 21 separate publications of choral music. Sibelius composed prolifically until the mid-1920s. However, after completing his Seventh Symphony (1924), the incidental music to *The Tempest* (1926), and the tone poem *Tapiola* (1926), he produced no large scale works for the remaining thirty years of his life. Although he is reputed to have stopped composing, he in fact attempted to continue writing, including abortive efforts to compose an eighth symphony. He wrote some Masonic music and re-edited some earlier works during this last period of his life, and retained an active interest in new developments in music, although he did not always view modern music favorably.

Pelléas et Mélisande, which had its premiere in 1893, was neither the first play by Belgian-born Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949) nor the most admired during his lifetime. Neither was it the only one reworked as an opera. But it produced musical interpretations by four celebrated composers within 12 years. After seeing the only Paris performance at the time, Claude Debussy fashioned his own libretto and within two years had completed his only opera in short score. Yet he held off scoring it until 1902, the year of its debut in the Opéra-Comique at Paris. In 1898, his senior colleague Gabriel Fauré was commissioned to write incidental music for a production of the play by Mrs. Patrick Campbell in English for London audiences. He hastily created 17 cues and asked his pupil Charles Koechlin to orchestrate them. Later on, however, Fauré scored three of them himself as a concert suite and added the *Sicilienne* ten years later. Next in line, Richard Strauss gave Arnold Schoenberg a copy of the play in 1902, which gave rise to a tone poem of Wagnerian length, chromatic diction, and orchestral density. The Vienna premiere in 1905 caused a near riot, but a 1911 revival validated Schoenberg's labyrinthine take on the text. The fourth famous composer to take on *Pelléas et Mélisande* was Sibelius, this time for a 1905 Helsinki production in Swedish that ran 15 performances, most of which he conducted. Sibelius had written his first theater score in 1898 and continued doing so until the end of his composing career in 1926 with music for 11 stage productions, including Hugo von Hofmannsthal's Salzburg version of *Everyman* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. *Pelléas*, though, was the first from which he extracted an orchestral suite. The nine movements do not follow Maeterlinck's sequence ("plot" is a moot word for so vaguely impressionistic a stage piece), but capture its timeless character next only to Debussy in his masterpiece.

Movements

1. At the Castle Gate
2. Mélisande
3. At the Seashore
4. A Spring in the Park
5. The Three Blind Sisters
6. Pastorale
7. Mélisande at the Spinning Wheel
8. Entr'acte
9. The Death of Mélisande

Sibelius later on slightly rearranged the music into a nine movement suite, published as Op. 46, which became one of his most popular works for theater. Sibelius later made a transcription of the suite for solo piano, excluding the 'At the Seashore' movement.

1. Sibelius begins "At the Castle Gate" (where "the sun rises over the sea"), an extraordinarily sonorous tone picture considering that the small orchestra has only two French horns and no other brass.
2. A sad-eyed portrait follows of "Mélisande," the drama's amnesiac heroine found wandering in the forest by Pelléas' dour brother Golaud, who brings her to their father Arkel's castle. Like the Swan of Tuonela a decade earlier, she is characterized by an English horn.
3. "At the Seashore" is only 22 bars long, yet wells up scarily near the close (this was usually omitted by conductors ranging from Sir Thomas Beecham to Herbert von Karajan until the end of the twentieth century, when a young generation of Finns redressed the imbalance).
4. "By a Spring in the Park" is a sunlit waltz for the protagonists before they fall fatefully in love.
5. In the theater, Sibelius wrote "The Three Blind Sisters" as a strophic song ("Thus they go up in the tower," where one of them hears a candle guttering), but assigned the melody to an English horn in the suite.
6. In "Pastoral," two clarinets playing in thirds echo Golaud's words, "What a marvelous day! What admirable weather!"
7. "Mélisande at her Spinning-Wheel," next up, is a far cry from Fauré's pretty music—ominous, metrically irregular music for oboe, clarinets, and agitated strings.
8. A brief "Entr'acte" (it introduced the play's fourth act) is a dappled miniature despite the descent into A minor midway.

This serves to heighten the poignance of No. 9, "Melisande's Death," a six-minute elegy that fades to nothingness at the end.