

## **Jean SIBELIUS**

(1865 - 1957)

*Symphony No. 2 in D Major, opus 43*

Born in southern Finland, Jean Sibelius was the second of three children. His father, a physician, left the family bankrupt owing to his financial extravagance (a trait that, along with heavy drinking, he would pass on to his son). The young Sibelius showed talent on the violin and, at age nine, composed his first work. In 1885, Sibelius entered the University of Helsinki to study law but after only a year found himself drawn to music and he began composition studies there instead. In 1889, Sibelius traveled to Berlin to study counterpoint and while there was exposed to the music of Richard Strauss. He also studied in Vienna with Karl Goldmark and Robert Fuchs. Sibelius returned to Finland and premiered his first significant work, "Kullervo", in April of 1893. In 1897, the Finnish Senate voted to pay Sibelius a short-term pension, which some years later became a lifetime conferral. The honor was in lieu of his loss of an important professorship in composition. In the next decade Sibelius became an international figure in the concert world with invitations Heidelberg and Berlin to conduct his music. After an operation to remove a throat tumor, in 1908, Sibelius was implored to abstain from alcohol and tobacco, a sanction he followed until 1915. For his last 30 years, Sibelius lived a mostly quiet life, working only on revisions and being generally regarded as the greatest living composer of symphonies. In 1955, his 90th birthday was celebrated throughout the world with many performances of his music. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1957. In addition to his 7 symphonies, he is remembered for his "Karelia Suite", "Pelleas et Melisande", the "Violin Concerto in d minor", and "Finlandia".

The genesis of the Second Symphony can be traced to Sibelius' trip to Italy in early 1901. While there, he began contemplating several ambitious projects, including a setting of Dante's "Divine Comedy" and a four-movement tone poem based on the story of "Don Juan". While none of these plans ever came to fruition, some of the ideas sketched during this trip did find their way into the second movement of this symphony. Sibelius' return to Finland for the summer and autumn was not accompanied by any great burst of inspiration, and extensive revisions delayed the first performance.

Sibelius still adhered to the classical symphonic model, with a plan of four movements with all but the scherzo in a version of Sonata Form. The Second Symphony bears the stamp of Sibelius' mature style and the musical materials and the orchestral sonorities evoke a cold, massive, unmistakably Nordic sound that has come to be associated with Sibelius. Sibelius' music was already a symbol of Finnish resistance to Russia when the Second Symphony appeared in a series of sold-out concerts in Helsinki in early March of 1902. Early reactions to the work included some efforts to read into it an overtly Nationalistic, Patriotic program. Sibelius, however, categorically denied any political program, maintaining that his symphonies were purely Absolute Music. The Second Symphony has retained an extraordinary popularity for its individualistic tonal language, dark wind coloring, muted string writing, simple folk-like themes, and distinctly "national" flavor that are all Sibelius to the core.

OF NOTE:

Glenn Gould once described Sibelius' tonal language as "passionate but anti-sensual."