

Oct. 3 - 4, 2015

Sebastian Fagerlund

Finnish composer

born: December 6, 1972, Parainen, Finland

Isola

Largamente espressivo

Agitato capriccioso

These are the first performances of this work on the Classics series; duration 15 minutes

Sebastian Fagerlund's formal training began with violin lessons under Simo Vuoristo at the Turku Conservatory. After a year of study in Holland he was accepted as a composition major at the Sibelius Academy in the studio of Erkki Jokinen. While completing his degree program in 2004, Sebastian also attended composition seminars with the composers Michael Jarrell, Magnus Lindberg, and Ivan Fedele.

As a composer, Mr. Fagerlund writes under the influence of 'post-modern' techniques but with Late-Impressionist leanings. He makes a deliberate effort to combine diverse, pan-cultural motifs, from traditional Western styles, Oriental devices and even 'heavy metal rock.'

Mr. Fagerlund's catalog of original scores is expansive in various genres, including the opera *Döbeln*, several works for full orchestra, and many solo pieces and chamber works.

Scored for full orchestra in 2007, *Isola* is an evocative and powerful narrative. About the music, the composer writes:

"I visited several years ago a beautiful island with the name Sjalö in the southwest archipelago of Finland. The island has, despite its tranquility and beauty, a dark and tragic history. During the 17th century people suffering from leprosy and women suspected of witchcraft were deported to the island. Some legends tell that they were only allowed to carry with them wood for their coffins. This feeling of scenic grandness and beauty of nature with strong underlying dark currents made a deep impression on me.

"The music is not in any way a description of the island itself. The impression though stayed in my mind and came to act as a sort of abstract inspiration for this piece.

"The piece, commissioned by conductor Dima Slobodeniouk and the Korsholm Music Festival, consists of two large movements which are linked to each other. The first movement; *Largamente espressivo* starts of with a rhythmical and aggressive introduction (*Agitato e violento*) where the material of the piece is presented. The aggressive flow of the music soon changes to the actual slow tempo of the first movement. The musical expression is melodic, intense and expressive.

"The rhythmically aggressive musical character which was introduced in the beginning of the piece returns with full force in the second movement; *Agitato capriccioso*. The music has a wild and flowing character from which ritualistic dance-like elements break off.

"The work was premiered by Vasa Symphony Orchestra conducted by Dima Slobodeniouk at the Korsholm Music Festival on the 3rd of July 2007."

Apart from the composer's commentary, we note a few details about the score:

A "sound-stage" introduction lifts the curtain on the music - worthy of a wide-screen sonic canvas for a Hollywood film. Almost at once, driving energy is heard from the lower strings, as

the full orchestral palette is unveiled at center stage. In sum follows a tonal cloud of orchestral effects, with an obscure but persistent rhythmic base. Diverse instrumental timbres combine to add a sense of drama and urgency to the scene. As noted by the composer, the darkly hued music conjures a vista of ultimate heartache, reflecting the human history of the desolate island.

Edvard Grieg

Norwegian composer

born: June 15, 1843, Bergen; died: September 4, 1907, Bergen

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra in A Minor, Op. 16

Allegro molto moderato

Adagio

Allegro moderato; Quasi presto

First BPO Classics performance: November 30, 1943, with pianist-conductor Percy Grainger;
most recent performance: April 30, May 1, 2011, with pianist Christopher O'Riley, conducted by JoAnn Falletta; duration 29 minutes

‘Romantic nationalism’ was the term Edward Grieg preferred to describe the muse behind his music. To be sure, his scores are biased with Nordic motifs, altogether picturesque, literary and/or musical. Likewise, his revered ***Piano Concerto*** is embroidered with tunes that bear a kinship to the folk heritage of Norway. Moreover, the same song-like manner is noted throughout Grieg’s catalog, including his incidental music for Henrik Ibsen’s great dramatic poem **Peer Gynt** (another work that enjoys best-seller status in the symphonic repertoire). Though no less worthy, the remainder of Grieg’s output is oddly far less performed, rich as it is with picturesque symphonic works, volumes of chamber music and more than one hundred and fifty songs.

About the distinctive vocal quality of his music overall Grieg provided a clue in a letter to a close friend:

“How does it happen that my songs play such an important part in my music? Quite simply owing to the circumstances that even I, like other mortals, was ‘for once in my life endowed with genius’ - to quote Goethe. And for me the flash of genius was love: I fell in love with a young girl, who became my wife and to this day my lifelong companion.”

Without question these are the words of an exalted romantic - and there was no shortage of those in the 19th century. But the composer was no less carried away by the love scenes in Wagnerian opera (Grieg attended the première of the complete ***Ring*** at Bayreuth) than he was with the intimacy of Chopin or the abandon of Liszt. For its time, that was a rare mix. In any case, Grieg became engaged to the accomplished soprano Nina Hagerup in 1864 and within months set to work on the current work, which he completed in 1868, then revised in 1906.

About the piece, an aside is worthy. Through the 20th century various historians have cited the ***Piano Concerto in A Minor*** as an example reserved formal construction (i.e. no big development of the main tunes as in the piano concertos of Beethoven and Brahms, for example). Hardly. By any measure ***Opus 16*** is a full-scale work. The issue is rather about style - simple as that.

As in the heritage of all fine concertos, Grieg structured the work to suit his own preferences. He was surely not duty-bound to emulate some cast-iron rule about requisite first and second themes, exposition, recapitulation, cadenza, coda, etc. Another rather well-known composer came to Grieg's defense, i.e. a composer who at first saw his own piano concerto rejected by those who were ostensibly 'in the know':

"What charm, what inimitable and rich musical imagery! What warmth and passion in his melodic phrases, what teeming vitality in his harmony, what originality and beauty in the turn of his piquant and ingenious modulations and rhythms, and in all the rest what interest, novelty and independence." (Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky)

A rolling tonic in the timpani sets the concerto on its way before big chords from the piano break like lightning onto the stage. Then follows that beguiling first melody in ivory A minor, one of the best loved moments in music. In sunlit C major, the second theme is warm, tender and searching. Listeners often note the development sounds as deeply Romantic as Serge Rachmaninoff, except Grieg's concerto was scored almost ten years before the great Russian master was born..! A brilliant cadenza emerges not long before the movement closes with a high energy coda.

Those who are especially fond of the placid second movements throughout the concerto repertoire will find lingering allure in the *Adagio*, set with tonal radiance in C-sharp major. The expression is soulful, limpid as the waters of Norwegian fjords. And is that a mountaineer's plaintive horn we hear at the close?

We are buffeted back into A minor at the first light of the third movement *Allegro moderato*. The rhythmic base has a dance-like swagger, light and sporty. But yet another poetic treat waits just around the bend - a gorgeous and gentle digression in F major. Just as we begin to expect a veiled and quiescent close, the lusty momentum returns - with the soloist in a gallant dash. In a brief wink from the baton, a final cadenza recitation transforms into gleaming A major at the close.

Jean Sibelius

Finnish composer

born: December 8, 1865, Hämeenlinna; died: September 20, 1957, Järvenpää

Symphony No.5 in E-flat major, Op. 82

Tempo molto moderato - Allegro moderato

Andante mosso, quasi allegretto

Allegro molto

First Classics performance: January 10, 1965, Richard Dufallo, conductor; most recent performance: May 6, 2001, JoAnn Falletta, conductor; duration 30 minutes
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Jean Sibelius enjoyed a long life of 92 years and a career highlighted by international esteem. However, most of his best known compositions were written before his 40th year (*Four Legends*, 1893; *Finlandia*, 1899; *Symphony No. 2*, 1901; *Violin Concerto*, 1903). The relative slowdown came for two reasons: on one hand Sibelius was exceedingly self-critical of anything he ever composed; on the other, he was taken up by the great winds of change which blew like furies through the emerging styles of serious music. To the point, names like Elgar, Debussy,

Rachmaninoff, Mahler and Richard Strauss were luring ears all over Europe. In retrospect we can appreciate Sibelius' diffidence.

Completed in 1915, *Symphony No. 5* received its premier in Helsinki during the birthday celebrations which feted the composer's 50th year. However - true to form - it seems everyone liked the new work but Sibelius, who remanded the piece back to his work bench. One year later the revised version received the same fate. Finally, the third issue, premiered in 1919, met the composer's inscrutably high standards. But for all the fuss, the modifications were few. His final revisions simply combined the first two movements (of the original four) into a single entity, the second part of which is a scherzo.

Opus 82 opens with a heralding call from the solo horn, setting the tone for the entire movement. One gets the unmistakable impression of tone-poetry - the mode was a favorite of Sibelius although in this case he remained taciturn about programmatic associations. An icy transparency unfolds as woodwinds and horns chant like soft glacial winds. The orchestral strings do not arrive on the scene until we are well into the score. Their mostly supportive role carries to the moment the scherzo (*Allegro moderato*) takes off with dancing and playful woodwinds.

Gentle variants mark the simple nature of the *Andante*, with articulate woodwinds sparkling under pizzicato and lyrical effects, again supported in the strings. All of this is mapped over the effects of lovely, rather poetic drones (and here and there one might detect a graceful wink at Brahms). Then brassy cathedral chords brush ominously onto the canvas. But wait - the somber tone appears only to escort a poignant folk-tune from the now-darkened strings. The movement closes, reassured by dotted woodwinds.

With a punctual boot from the timpani, the *Allegro molto* is vaulted into quasi-perpetual motion. Listen as the momentum careens into angular cascades marked by the horns. (This is the chime-effect that the English wit Sir Donald Tovey once called "Thor's swinging hammer".) A shuddering frenzy then evolves into a duo between the flute and clarinet, a lyrical moment which is then overlaid by lush strings à la Rachmaninoff. The exalted tenderness is now joined by the trumpets and lower brass, swinging the chimed hammer in full 20th century regalia. Building to a climax like a great film score, the color-choreography here achieves one of the most powerful apotheoses in all of music - accented at the close with staccato power-chords from the brass.

program notes by Edward Yadzinski

