

Sibelius Piano Works, Vol. 2

Sleeve notes

As with the first CD which I recorded two years ago, the choice of repertoire has evolved not only from my exploration of the composer's sizeable body of piano works but also from a desire to select an attractive and varied combination of pieces representing all the main periods of Sibelius's creative life from the early 1890s through to the mid-1920s. At the same time, I wanted to continue the natural process of combining large-scale works with shorter pieces (or sets of pieces) in a way which might mirror a concert programme. Therefore, I have chosen one of Sibelius's most important large-scale piano works, the Sonata in F major Op. 12, as well as one of his best-loved orchestral transcriptions, *Valse triste*. I have always admired the three strikingly original Sonatinas Op. 67 and likewise the evocative *Characteristic Impressions* Op. 103. The captivating *Bagatelles* Op. 97 and by comparison, the more serene *Lyric Pieces* Op. 74 complete the selection for this disc, confirming that Sibelius was also a masterful miniaturist.

The origins of *Valse triste* lie in the incidental music written in 1903 for the play *Kuolema* (Death) by Sibelius's brother-in-law Arvid Järnefelt. *Kuolema* was premiered at the National Theatre in Helsinki on December 2nd 1903 with Sibelius conducting. Titled *Tempo di valse*, the first musical number was later arranged by the composer for a larger orchestra and it became *Valse triste*, premiered in October 1904. The composer's own piano arrangement of this sombre, macabre piece of music dates from the same year. In the opening scene of the play, a weary son has fallen asleep by the bedside of his dying mother. As a dim light and the sound of distant music fill the room, the mother rises and moves slowly and silently here and there, dressed in a white garment resembling a ball dress. Järnefelt's stage instructions are:

"Quiet music from a string orchestra is heard, evolving with the increasing light into a suave waltz... finally the mother grows tired and leans against the wall, almost unconscious. The music subsides... horrified, she exerts her strength and rejoins the dance as the music swells."

The mother joins the ghostly visitors in the increasingly wild, uncontrollable rhythmic energy of the waltz (a scenario Ravel was later to explore in *La Valse*) and as the music reaches a climax, there is a sudden knock on the door. The mother cries out, the waltz music ebbs away and the spectral guests disappear, for it is Death who stands on the threshold.

The three Sonatinas Op. 67 (1912) are amongst Sibelius's most important piano works and were dedicated to Martha Tornell, his children's piano teacher. The first Sonatina in F sharp minor has a delicate and slightly restrained opening melody, as well as a deliberate harmonic ambiguity as the piece seems to start in D major. Its mysterious second subject is a fragile, partly unaccompanied melody seemingly in C sharp minor but with its tonality undermined by the

tritone between D natural and G sharp. After a tautly rhythmic passage of broken octaves and emphatic chords followed by groups of lightly flowing triplets the opening melody is restated, this time with some piquant harmonic alterations.

The central *Largo* presents a leisurely unfolding melody of great beauty which rises to a defiant climax. The sonatina's quirky *finale* opens with a right-hand accompaniment in broken octaves joined by a rising, agitated melody in the middle register. Cascades of triplets held in the pedal over a sustained bass note and fleeting dissonances are memorable features of this unusual, somewhat sparsely textured movement. Sibelius conjures up the most delicate of endings as a single *pianissimo* line recedes into the distance.

Sonatina No. 2 in E major is the sunniest and most relaxed in style of the three. It has more than a hint of the Baroque in its first movement and makes frequent use of canonic imitation. The beautiful slow movement once again provides the emotional core of the work. A cello-like melody passes seamlessly into the middle register and is then taken up by the right hand. The particularly wide spacings between the bass and melody line are an interesting feature, as are the occasional jarring discords which contribute to the expressive intensity. The cheerful *finale* has a certain jauntiness to its rhythmic step, its lively syncopated melody partnered with a descending bass line. Leaping chords and the interplay of the different voice parts create an ebullient mood although the sonatina's rather subdued ending feels a little out of character, but is charming in its simplicity nonetheless.

Perhaps the most intriguing of the sonatinas, and certainly the most serious in style is the third in B flat minor. As well as introducing a more sombre mood, the final sonatina is the most experimental and forward-looking of the three in terms of its structure.

This time there are essentially only two movements, although the second movement *Andante* continues directly into a concluding *Allegretto* section without a break.

There is a sense of greater fluidity in this work (for example there are numerous tempo changes marked in the score) and a real sense of organic development given that there are clear links between the main themes of each movement or section. The sonatina's melancholic opening melody, punctuated by thoughtful pauses, is built on a rising third followed by a falling fourth and fifth. Sibelius uses this motif in different guises for all the main themes which follow, albeit by inverting the rising third when it is heard in the flowing *Allegro moderato* theme seven bars into the piece, again in the ominous march-like theme which begins the second movement and most memorably of all in the sweeping final *Allegretto* section with its running semi-quaver accompaniment. Various subsidiary themes often take the music into a major key, providing added rhythmic impetus to an opening movement which is otherwise characterised by fluctuations in pulse, winding chromatic melodies and a richness of contrapuntal textures.

In the concluding *Andante-Allegretto* Sibelius succeeds in linking the two sections by means of transitional passages which gradually accelerate the basic tempo as well as increasing the underlying tension. After an almost imperceptible shift from steady march tempo to flowing compound metre and a more vigorous rising passage marked *deciso* the final reincarnation of the work's opening theme has a feeling of inevitability about it. The concluding *Allegretto* has a feeling of grim defiance, capricious at times and full of brilliant pianistic display yet devoid of any sense of triumph.

The *Six Bagatelles* Op. 97 (1920) show the lighter side of Sibelius. Here, the composer's seemingly effortless melodic inspiration and the introduction of elements of pianistic display as well as humour combine to memorable effect. The opening melody of *Humoresque I* imitates the sound of a guitar and this piece has an unmistakable Spanish style with its rhythmically suggestive dance tune and frequent crossing of the hands. In the middle section the introductory scale which was at first heard unaccompanied is now transformed into a richly harmonised plaint. The *Lied's* tender melody and beautifully crafted accompaniment have given the second piece of the set the distinction of being the most often performed as a separate piece. Famously, the Russian pianist Emil Gilels surprised a Helsinki audience by performing this as an encore following Tchaikovsky's 1st Piano Concerto. *Little Waltz* with its bubbling D major melody explores an unusual combination of keys. The introduction of F major for the sweeping theme in double thirds interrupts proceedings and makes playful use of parallel moving parts. The fourth *Bagatelle*, *Humoristischer Marsch* is characterised by a grim humour and a nagging sense of unease despite the facility of the right hand's scurrying passagework and some lusty syncopations which add to the overall comical effect. *Impromptu* has a nostalgic feel to its gently lyrical theme, which rises to an impassioned climax complete with thunderous chords and resounding bass octaves before ending in sadness and resignation. The final movement of the set, *Humoresque II* opens with a questioning *poco lento* theme with a gentle off-beat accompaniment which subtly reminds us of its companion piece which opened the set of *Bagatelles*. Sibelius has more surprises in store and a scampering *vivace* mischievously interrupts the serene introduction, bringing with it quirky harmonic juxtapositions and unexpected dynamic changes. The running figurations at times sound like breathless dialogue or parody the art of practising Czerny exercises as the grimly determined scales rattle up the keyboard before breaking off into chromatic chord sequences or pianistic fireworks. The relentless charge to the top of the keyboard followed by three triumphant major chords rounds off the set with considerable virtuosity and no lack of ironic humour.

The Five Characteristic Impressions Op. 103 (1924) were written around the time of the 7th Symphony and Sibelius's piano style had by this time become richer in its textures and chromatic harmonies. One of the most striking aspects of this set is the huge difference in style between its lavish opening piece, *The Village Church* compared with the austere sound world and repeated bass

accompaniment of *In Mournful Mood*, which ends the set in a chilling, desolate fashion.

The impressive, organ-like writing in *The Village Church* allows the tone to naturally reverberate due to the generous amounts of sustaining pedal which can be applied. The thick chords moving steadily in parallel motion evoke the timeless style of Palestrina and after a grand *crescendo* break off into an arpeggiated cadenza. Reminiscent of a brilliant organ improvisation, certain notes in the left hand are pinpointed with accents, producing a striking effect and some beautiful whole tone harmonies.

The Fiddler is a humorous depiction and the various string techniques translated to the piano must have provided great entertainment for the composer, whose main instrument was of course the violin. This witty miniature is cast in free *polska* style (the West Finnish version of the polonaise) and its *polska* melody contains many deliberate 'wrong' notes, sometimes leading to a modal colouring of the scale. Violin techniques which are cleverly imitated include double stops, lyrically sustained notes and *pizzicati*. The next piece, *The Oarsman* introduces a suitably lilting melody and features some atmospheric modulations. A memorable point in the piece is when the music plunges into C minor and the tension rises, only for calm to be restored and the most dreamlike of endings to unfold.

A shocking change of mood follows with the brutality of *The Storm* and with it the quick-fire alternating chords which demonstrate the composer's natural flair for full-blooded, virtuoso pianism when required. The cross-hand passages which suddenly pick out a savage chord in the treble register conjure up a succession of lightning flashes whilst the rumbling in the bass becomes ever more frenzied. Finally, after all energy has been spent and all hope seems to have been extinguished, perhaps it was inevitable that Sibelius would conclude the set with a bleak funeral march. *In Mournful Mood* is peculiarly mesmerising in its overall effect, with its inexorable build-up of tension, crushing dissonances and relentless, ostinato accompaniment.

Composed in 1914, at around the same time that Sibelius wrote his ever-popular set of five pieces *The Trees*, the set of Four *Lyric Pieces* Op. 74 are characterised by a sense of spaciousness and serenity, at times leaning towards a more improvisatory style. During his stay in Berlin in January and February of 1914, Sibelius's interest in impressionism reawakened and hearing Busoni's pupil, Rudolf Ganz, play Debussy's *L'Isle Joyeuse* and various other pieces might have provided an impetus for this. The opening movement, *Eclogue*, appears to imitate woodwind writing with its gentle triplet lines built from the aeolian mode. Later, the piece breaks free from its serenely contrapuntal style with improvisatory passages of cascading arpeggiated chords producing a beautiful rippling effect. *Soft West Wind* has a little more rhythmic impetus and again there are some wonderful pianistic touches with shimmering arpeggios in the top register and luxuriant chains of chromatic thirds. This self-consciously impressionistic piece is subtly persuasive in suggesting a summer seascape and evoking a languid, nostalgic mood. Crisp

rhythms and leaping melodies aptly conjure up the cheerful scene *At the Dance*. Sibelius captures this to perfection with linking *accelerando* sections and then an unexpected transposition of the catchy dance tune up a semitone into D Flat major. The wheels almost threaten to fall off during the helter-skelter coda with its split octaves in rapid contrary motion before the beautifully understated ending. Perhaps the most memorable of the *Lyric Pieces* is *In the Old Home*, a slow waltz in B Flat minor with an exquisite melody and palpable sense of nostalgia. There is a monumental final build-up before a sequence of sustained chords provides a reassuring close in the major key. When Wilhelm Kempff visited *Ainola* shortly before Sibelius's death he thought: "the atmosphere here reminds me of the piano piece *In the Old Home*."

The F major sonata Op. 12 (1893) is an ambitious work in the late-romantic tradition, demonstrating a full-blooded range of expression and comprehensive use of the piano's resources. There is certainly a sense of boldness and youthful exuberance in the way this sonata is conceived. If the composer which might have influenced Sibelius most of all in his piano writing was Schumann, in the F major sonata the inspiration appears to be drawn from Beethoven and Liszt. There is a confidence and brilliance to the melodic writing and a unique treatment of the left-hand accompaniment in the outer movements, creating a pulsating, strumming effect using alternating fifths or octaves in the bass. The first movement's memorable opening theme spans a page and a half, carrying the listener (by way of some unexpected chromatic modulations) all the way through to the impassioned series of *fortissimo* chords some 36 bars later. This is piano writing on an epic scale, revealing an uncompromising, expansive approach together with a natural command of the keyboard. However, Sibelius does not hesitate in exploring the widest possible contrasts of dynamic or texture and does so to considerable dramatic effect, for example when searching for the most beautiful spacing of the simple, *pianissimo* chords which herald the central development section. The extended development is again dominated by the upper line melody in the right hand, yet is altogether compelling in its musical argument and sense of unfolding drama. There are moments of breath taking stillness and serenity as well as passages of strikingly forward-looking harmonic language and extreme chromaticism. The return of the stamping rising octave theme in the bass, accompanied by fearsome right-hand chords, seems to suggest symphonic writing. Towards the end of the development section Beethoven's shadow is never too far away, most notably perhaps in the syncopated, falling semitone motif in the bass line shortly before the flurry of quaver activity which leads to the recapitulation.

The final section develops this syncopated theme with greater insistence, leading to an exhilarating climax using the full arsenal of pianistic effects including surging chords, wide leaps back and forth from bass to treble and a brilliant contrary motion sweep into the second, conclusive reprise of the opening theme. A sparkling coda uses the technique of thematic disintegration as snippets of the opening melody are repeated in falling sequence before one last reminder of the main theme and the majestic closing chords.

The central movement is an *Andantino* in B flat minor which opens with a simple melody with syncopated chordal accompaniment. This poignant main theme is based on an unfinished song for choir to the Kalevala text *Rapids, cease thy foaming torrent*, in which Lemminkäinen invokes the daughter of the rapids. The solemn opening section breaks off mysteriously, and Sibelius has a surprise in store with a very light, dancing *Presto* theme which sparkles in the uppermost region of the piano register – this is a development of a very similar piano texture used fleetingly but also to great effect in *Florestan*, composed four years earlier. The fast section within the sonata's middle movement is set in the phrygian mode (C sharp minor) and was possibly intended to suggest a kantele tune (the kantele is a Finnish string instrument of the zither family.) A return of the principal theme but now with a swirling, arpeggiated accompaniment in the depths of the tenor and bass registers is suggestive of an incantatory rune as a dramatic *crescendo* develops. Breaking off suddenly at its climactic point, a reprise of the *presto* material in F minor then leads to a final return of the opening chordal theme. Eloquent in its unadorned simplicity, the opening melody is heard in a partly reharmonised version, anticipating the hushed reverence of the movement's closing bars. The lively finale is a rondo, somewhat shorter than the other two movements, characterised by motor rhythms and a cheerful, bustling theme stated *pianissimo*. The opening melody resides in the tenor register and its suppressed energy is complemented by repeated bass patterns, suggesting sustained orchestral pedal notes. A more relaxed, song-like melody in the subdominant key of B Flat has a feeling of breadth and grandeur, Sibelius again employing pedal notes in the bass although the texture and harmonies are noticeably richer. After a more turbulent section which provides a vigorous development of some of the opening thematic material, there is a triumphant return of the song-like theme now fortified with a sweeping left-hand accompaniment in the manner of Tchaikovsky and Grieg. A linking passage of tremolos leads to the exuberant coda, Sibelius adding spice to the underlying harmonies and providing a fittingly virtuoso ending to this joyful finale with cascades of arpeggios.

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