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SIBELIUS

VIOLIN CONCERTO

D minor/d-Moll/Ré mineur

Op. 47



Eulenburg

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PREFACE

‘Hideous and boring’, read the shattering judgement that the already aged violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim pronounced on the Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47, by Jean Sibelius and asked – as the publisher Robert Lienau communicated to the composer in a letter of 20 October 1905 – his students specifically not to study it.¹ Both the leading Finnish music critic Karl Flodin, and the German composer-colleague Max von Schillings also apparently took little pleasure in the work:

The Violin Concerto by Sibelius [...] has, with more in-depth study of it, given me a keen disappointment. I have the greatest sympathy with Sibelius artistically as well as personally and have stood up for his [Lemminkäinen-] Legends to the best of my ability; for the concerto, I cannot do the same. It undoubtedly indeed offers the solo instrument a beautiful, interesting task [...] But the invention seems to me slight and appears to me in many places poor in design, mawkish and vapid.²

Sibelius revised the work and even if the concerto no longer failed so miserably as at its premiere, scepticism was initially predominant. Only slowly was the problem child accepted into soloists’ repertoire. But finally, as it was performed and recorded by both Jascha Heifetz and David Oistrakh, the work began its triumphal march into the concert halls of the world and ultimately became the most played violin concerto of the 20th century.

Sibelius loved the violin from childhood on, and began systematic instruction around 1880, and, as he later confessed to his friend and biographer Karl Ekman, ‘henceforth, it was for 10 years my ardent wish, the proudest goal of my ambition to become a great violin

virtuoso’.³ Time and again he took part in chamber music and made solo appearances, not only in his student period in Helsinki, but also in Berlin and Vienna. His ambitions extended so far that he auditioned in 1891 for a temporary position with the Vienna Philharmonic – but in vain: ‘Not bad’, judged the jury, but nevertheless advised against a career as violinist.⁴ The after effects of an elbow injury and the stage fright with which he had to struggle may have played a role – he abandoned his virtuoso plans.

If, then, he himself could not become a violin soloist, Sibelius obviously wanted at least to write a solo work for ‘his’ instrument. Writing from Vienna on 2 November 1890 he told his future wife Aino of a sketch for a violin concerto.⁵ Possibly he received further stimulus in the first half of the 1890s when a circle of artists in Helsinki got together calling themselves a ‘symposium’; amongst this group was also the German violinist Willy Burmester. Sibelius then mentioned this violin concerto for the first time in a letter to his wife on 18 September 1902: ‘I’ve gotten some wonderful themes for the violin concerto’.⁶ Burmester, who was to have given the premiere and to whom the work was to have been dedicated, was enthusiastic when he received the piano score of the first two movements in Berlin, his

³ Erkki Salmenhaara, ‘The Violin Concerto’, in: *The Sibelius Companion*, ed. Glenda Dawn Goss, (Westport [Conn.], London, 1996), 103–119, here, 103. The article gives basic information about the violin concerto; also: Jukka Tiilikainen, ‘The Genesis of the Violin Concerto’, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Sibelius*, ed. Daniel M. Grimley (Cambridge, 2004), 66–80, and Fabian Dahlström, *Sibelius-Werkverzeichnis* (Wiesbaden, 2003), 220–224.

⁴ Salmenhaara, 104

⁵ Tiilikainen, 248, footnote 3

⁶ Quotation from: Glenda Dawn Goss, *Sibelius. A Composer’s Life and the Awakening of Finland* (Chicago, London, 2009), 300; Minna Lindgren, ‘I’ve got some lovely themes for a violin concerto’, in: *Finnish Music Quarterly* (1990, 3–4) 24–31, here: 25; Tiilikainen: ‘marvellous’, 67.

¹ Quotation from: Tomi Mäkelä, article, ‘Sibelius’, in: *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Allgemeine Enzyklopädie der Musik*, 2nd, newly revised edition, ed. Ludwig Finscher (Kassel, Basel, etc., 2006), biographical part, vol.15, col.733

² Quotation from: *ibid.*, col.734

IV

new domain. Only once before was he to have become similarly inspired by a new work, when Tchaikovsky showed him his violin concerto.⁷ Sibelius worked at full stretch on the third movement and on the orchestration. The premiere was to take place in March 1904; financial reasons, however, caused Sibelius to shift the premiere to Helsinki and to bring it forward in time. Scheduling reasons prevented Burmester's playing it, though, and so the premiere took place on 8 February 1904 in the festival hall of the University of Helsinki with Viktor Nováček and the orchestra of the Philharmonic Society under the direction of the composer.

The soloist, who was a teacher at the Helsinki Music Institute, was not up to its demands technically and even the accompaniment, restricted to an orchestra of merely 45 players, was only mediocre. The premiere turned out a disaster: '[...] it was impossible to fathom the composer's meaning, so great was the cacophony',⁸ wrote the severest critic Karl Flodin. Even when the reviews – except for minor reservations – turned out positively, the judgement of this most influential critic was devastating: it was 'boring', 'a misguided effort.'⁹ Sibelius himself had been engaged with chamber music in his early years. Only at the age of 25 did he turn to orchestral music, which now took up an ever more important place in his musical thinking. With the premiere of *Kullervo* on 28 April 1892 he began his triumphal career as symphonist, after which followed such important works as *En saga*, the *Karelia* music, the *Swan of Tuonela* and finally the first two symphonies (1899/1902). Flodin now maintained that the violin concerto was a step backwards and his 'slating review' certainly contributed to the fact that subsequent concerts were poorly attended even when advocates of the concerto consistently spoke out. Also, Burmester, who had taken note of the criticism, announced to Sibelius that he would play the

concerto 'in such a way that the city will be at your [Sibelius's] feet'.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the composer decided otherwise:

I shall withdraw my Violin Concerto; it will not appear for two years. My great secret sorrow at present. The first movement is to be formed completely anew; also the proportions of the *Andante* [recte: *Adagio di molto*], and so on.¹¹

Did Flodin's criticism really hurt him so much or did other musical reasons play a role? Did the work not find favour in its present form with the ears of the self-critical composer? Compositional changes after the first hearing were nothing unusual for Sibelius. To withdraw a work was, however, essentially more serious. But initially Sibelius was busy with other projects; perhaps he did not want to worry about the violin concerto but needed time to gain some distance from it. Only in June 1905 did he get down to the revision that he finished within a month. Possibly decisive in this respect were the activities of his publisher who was able to arrange a performance of the new version in Berlin under Richard Strauss. The introductory movement was shortened, a second cadenza in Bachian style eliminated; only a few changes concerned the middle movement, whereas the finale was pruned back by Sibelius. In all, the composer did away with the technical demands and brightened up the orchestral setting. Whether it was that again Burmester's performance schedule did not allow an appointment for the planned concert,¹² or that Sibelius did not want to contradict his publisher who had decided on the concertmaster of the Royal Court Opera, Carl (Karel) Halíř, as soloist – the premiere of the revised concerto took place on 19 October 1905 with the Philharmonic Orchestra under Richard Strauss, and once again without Willy Burmester. Twice now the German violin virtuoso who had contributed decisively to the genesis of the work

⁷ Salmenhaara, 105

⁸ Quotation from Salmenhaara: *ibid.*, 111

⁹ *ibid.*, 107

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 109

¹¹ Quotation from: *ibid.*, 110

¹² Salmenhaara, 109

was denied his chance of a public performance. Thus offended, he decided that he would never play the concerto; Sibelius thereupon removed the dedication from Burmeister in favour of Franz von Vecsey, a Hungarian child prodigy. The work in its revised format was received more positively (if not effusively) than the original version. The first performance in Helsinki – with the violinist Hermann Grevesmühl – took place without much response from audience or press. His chief critic Flodin was not convinced by the revised version, only the *Adagio* was given his unqualified acceptance. The concerto was first played by a Finnish soloist (Arno Hannikainen) in 1920. Sibelius himself conducted the new version only once, in 1925 with Naum Levin in Helsinki.

If the birth of the Violin Concerto was thus initially ill-starred, critical opinion has meanwhile changed fundamentally. Sibelius's work belongs without doubt to the corpus of outstanding Romantic violin concertos, continuing the line established by Mendelssohn, Bruch, Brahms and Tchaikovsky. It adopts on the one hand the classical three-movement form, and on the other, the symphonic style, the virtuosic grasp, but is dissociated from the purely virtuosic concertos à la Paganini, Bériot or Viotti. As with its Mendelssohn model cherished by Sibelius – and which he himself played in his

youth – the soloist takes a prominent stance over an orchestral surface right at the beginning of the first, rhapsodically free and broadly soaring, theme. Two other themes follow in interplay of solo and orchestra; the traditional development is, however, entrusted entirely to the solo violin, in a tremendous cadenza. The song-like middle movement is among the composer's loveliest inspirations and enraptures the audience from the beginning, whereas the packed, rhythmically pointed rondo-finale has a dancing, restless character. Even if Sibelius had lessened its technical demands in the revised version, the concerto offers the soloist grateful technical as well as musical assignments, and the dark orchestral colours, the melancholy and even heavy-heartedness of the score have a part to play in letting Sibelius's work become a really great symphonic solo concerto that we could no longer imagine being without. The plan for another concerto, a *concerto lirico* mentioned in 1915 to a publisher, was never realized; a handful of smaller-scaled orchestral works, two each of serenades and humoresques, followed – the D minor Concerto, Op. 47, was to remain Sibelius's only violin concerto.

Wolfgang Birtel

Translation: Margit L. McCorkle

VORWORT

„Scheußlich und langweilig“ lautete das niederschmetternde Urteil, das der schon gealterte Violinvirtuose Joseph Joachim über das Violinkonzert d-Moll, op. 47, von Jean Sibelius fällte, und forderte – wie der Verleger Robert Lienau dem Komponisten in einem Brief vom 20. Oktober 1905 mitteilte – seine Studenten ausdrücklich auf, es nicht einzustudieren¹. Und nicht nur der führende finnische Musikkritiker Karl Flodin, sondern auch der deutsche Komponistenkollege Max von Schillings zeigte sich vom Werk wenig erfreut:

Das Violinconcert von Sibelius ... hat mir, bei eingehender Beschäftigung damit, eine starke Enttäuschung bereitet. Ich trage künstlerisch wie persönlich die grösste Sympathie mit Sibelius und bin für seine [Lemminkänen-]Legenden nach Kräften eingetreten, für das Concert kann ich ein gleiches nicht tun. Dem Soloinstrument bietet es ja zweifellos eine schöne, interessante Aufgabe ... Die Erfindung aber wirkt auf mich gering und an manchen Stellen erscheint sie mir stylwidrig, süßlich und flach.²

Sibelius überarbeitete das Werk, und auch wenn das Konzert nicht mehr so gnadenlos „durchfiel“ wie bei der Uraufführung, überwog zunächst Skepsis, nur langsam fand sein Sorgenkind Eingang ins Solistenrepertoire. Aber als es schließlich Jascha Heifetz und David Oistrach musizierten und für die Schallplatte aufnahmen, trat es seinen Siegeszug in die Konzertsäle der Welt an, wurde schließlich zum meisteingespilten Violinkonzert des 20. Jahrhunderts.

Jean Sibelius liebte die Violine von Kindesbeinen an, begann um 1880 mit systematischem Unterricht, und „für zehn Jahre war es mein glühender Wunsch, das stolzeste Ziel meiner Bemühungen, ein großer Violinvirtuose zu

werden“, wie er später dem Freund und Biografen Karl Ekman gestand³. Immer wieder hatte er Kammermusik- und Solo-Auftritte, nicht nur in der Studienzeit in Helsinki, sondern auch in Berlin und Wien. Seine Ambitionen gingen sogar so weit, dass er 1891 für eine Aushilfsstelle bei den Wiener Philharmonikern vorspielte – wenn auch vergeblich: „nicht schlecht“, urteilte die Jury, riet aber trotzdem von einer Violinistenlaufbahn ab⁴. Nachwirkungen einer Ellbogenverletzung und das Lampenfieber, mit dem er zu kämpfen hatte, mögen eine Rolle gespielt haben – er gab seine Virtuosenpläne auf.

Wenn er denn schon nicht selbst Violin-solist werden konnte, wollte Jean Sibelius offensichtlich wenigstens ein Solowerk für „sein“ Instrument schreiben. Bereits am 2. November 1890 berichtete er seiner späteren Frau Aino aus Wien von einer Skizze zu einem Violinkonzert⁵. Weiteren Auftrieb bekam er möglicherweise in der ersten Hälfte der 1890er-Jahre, als sich in Helsinki ein „Symposium“ genannter Kreis von Künstlern versammelte, unter denen sich auch der deutsche Geiger Willy Burmester befand. Sibelius erwähnte dann dieses Violinkonzert erstmals in einem Brief an seine Frau am 18. September 1902: „Ich habe herrliche Themen für ein Violinkonzert empfangen.“⁶ Burmester, der die Uraufführung spielen und dem das Werk gewidmet werden sollte, war begeistert, als er im September 1903 den Klavierauszug der beiden ersten Sätze in Berlin, seiner neuen Wirkungsstätte,

¹ Zit. nach: Tomi Mäkelä, Art. „Sibelius“, in: *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Allgemeine Enzyklopädie der Musik*, zweite, neu bearbeitete Ausgabe, hrsg. von Ludwig Finscher, Kassel, Basel u. a. 2006, Personenteil, Bd. 15, Sp. 733.

² Zit. nach: ebda., Sp. 734.

³ Erkki Salmenhaara, „The Violin Concerto“, in: *The Sibelius Companion*, hrsg. v. Glenda Dawn Goss, Westport (Conn.), London 1996, S. 103–119, hier: S. 103 (Alle Zitate außer 1), 2) und 6) aus dem Englischen vom Autor übersetzt). Der Artikel gibt grundlegende Informationen zum Violinkonzert ebenso wie: Jukka Tiilikainen, „The genesis of the Violin Concerto“, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Sibelius*, hrsg. v. Daniel M. Grimley, Cambridge 2004, S. 66–80 und Fabian Dahlström, *Sibelius-Werkverzeichnis*, Wiesbaden 2003, S. 220–224.

⁴ Salmenhaara, S. 104.

⁵ Tiilikainen, S. 248, Fußnote 3.

⁶ Zit. nach: Dahlström, *Sibelius-Werkverzeichnis*, S. 220.