

# JEAN SIBELIUS VIOLIN CONCERTO (1905)

*“The Violin Concerto is in more than one sense, a compensation for, or a sublimation of Sibelius’ unfulfilled ambition to become a virtuoso international violinist.”* (Burnett James)

## JEAN SIBELIUS BIOGRAPHY (1865-1957):

- Born December 8, 1865 in Hämeelinna, Finland, to Swedish speaking parents.
- His father, a doctor, died in 1868, bankrupt. Mother moved in with extended family.
- He was introduced to music by his aunt Evelina. Began piano lessons at age 9.
- Began violin lessons at age 15. Aspired to become a violin virtuoso. It was not to be.
- His real first name was Janne (a version of Johann). During his high school years he changed it to the more French sounding Jean.
- Studied in the Helsinki Music Institute (1885-89), Berlin (1889-90) & Vienna (1890-91).
- Married Aino Järnefelt in 1892 and built a home *Ainola*, on Lake Tuusula, Järvenpää, where Sibelius lived from 1904 for the rest of his life.
- Around this time Sibelius took to heavy drinking and carousing. Like his father, his finances were precarious.
- 1899 *Kullervo*, nationalistic choral symphony, gave him his first recognition.
- Sibelius’ nationalistic music, based on Finnish myth, continued with *Karelia Suite* (1893), 4 tone poems on legendary hero Lemminkäinen (1895) & *Finlandia* (1899).
- Symphonies # 1 (1899), 2 (1902).
- Violin Concerto premiered 1904, amid debt & drinking in the composer’s life.
- Difficulties with the concerto led to more bouts of drinking. The revision of the concerto was a turbulent process. Revised version premiered 1905.
- 1907-09: Throat cancer scare. A series of throat surgeries; tumor removed. This caused Sibelius to quit smoking and drinking.
- Symphonies # 3 (1907), 4 (1911), 5 (1915), 6 (1923) & 7 (1924).
- In 1926 he stopped composing. He lived for another 30 years. This long dry spell is referred to as “The Silence of Järvenpää,” the town where he lived.
- Sibelius did attempt an 8<sup>th</sup> Symphony but after five years he gave up and destroyed all documents related to this work.
- In the 1930s Sibelius’ music was extremely popular. For example, a survey of the New York Philharmonic audience revealed Sibelius to be their most popular composer.
- Sibelius is considered a hero in Finland, father of Finnish music. December 8, his birthday, is celebrated as Flag Day in Finland, also referred to as “Day of Finnish Music.”
- Sibelius died September 20, 1957 at age 91.

## SIBELIUS AND THE VIOLIN:

- The Violin Concerto is Sibelius' only work for solo instrument and orchestra.
- Michael Steinberg points out that while most keyboard concertos were written by composers for themselves, many violin concertos were written for others.
- In this regard, Sibelius's concerto stands out as unique: "*Sibelius wrote his for a kind of ghostly self. He was a failed violinist.*"
- Sibelius began seriously studying the violin in the autumn of 1881, at age 15. He aspired to become a violin virtuoso.
- "*When I play the violin I am filled with a strange feeling; it is as though the insides of the music opened up to me.*" (Sibelius, 1883)
- Between 1886-1891 Sibelius played the violin in various orchestras and chamber ensembles in Helsinki and Vienna.
- Sibelius' violin aspirations were dashed in January 1891 when he auditioned for the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and was rejected. "*When he got back to his room, Sibelius broke down and wept.*" (Erik Tawaststjerna, Sibelius biographer)
- There were various factors that led to his failure as a violinist: late age of start; inadequate resources in Finland for such a purpose. Furthermore, "*He had neither the physical coordination nor the temperament for such a career.*" (Steinberg)
- "*My tragedy was that I wanted to be a celebrated violinist at any price...It was a very painful awakening when I had to admit that I had begun my training for the exacting career of a virtuoso too late.*" (Sibelius)
- Sibelius's Violin Concerto, "*is imbued ...with his feelings for the instrument, and the pain of his farewell...to his overriding ambition.*" (Steinberg)

## SIBELIUS THE COMPOSER:

- Sibelius was mainly a composer of orchestral works, mostly symphonies and tone poems.
- He composed seven numbered symphonies. Some classify his choral work *Kullervo* (1893) and orchestral suite *Lemminkäinen* (1895), both based on the Finnish national myth *Kalevala* as symphonies.
- His tone poem *Finlandia* (1899), one of his most popular works, is a cornerstone of Finnish nationalism.
- His Violin Concerto is the only work he composed for orchestra & solo instrument.
- During his long career his style evolved from Viennese Classical and early Romantic, to Neoclassical, to Expressionist and finally novel 20<sup>th</sup> century works that can't be pegged.

## HISTORY OF THE VIOLIN CONCERTO:

- The concerto was intended for famous German violinist Willy Burmester (1869-1933).
- Sibelius knew Burmester from a stint the violinist did as concertmaster in Helsinki.
- Sibelius began work on the concerto, September 1902 after visiting Burmester in Berlin.
- By September 1903 the first two movements were ready in piano score.
- Sibelius completed the third movement and orchestration by December 1903.
- Sibelius sent the score to Burmester. It was to be dedicated to him.
- Burmester: *“Wonderful! Masterly! Only once before have I spoken in such terms to a composer, and that was when Tchaikovsky showed me his concerto.”*
- Burmester never performed the concerto and in fact, boycotted it for the rest of his career.
- Perhaps for financial reasons, Sibelius pushed for an early premiere; Burmester was unavailable and didn't have enough time to learn the piece.
- The premiere occurred February 8, 1904, in Helsinki, with Victor Nováček as soloist and Sibelius conducting the Helingsfors Philharmonic.
- Nováček was a violin teacher at the Helsinki Music Institute with no reputation as a performer. He did not possess the capability to perform such a technically challenging concerto.
- The premiere was a disaster. *“A red faced and perspiring Victor Nováček fought a losing battle with a solo part that bristled with even greater difficulties...than in the definitive score.”* (Erik Tawaststjerna)
- While there were some favorable reviews, an extremely negative review by Karl Flodin, the foremost music critic of Finland, doomed the concerto. Very few people attended the second and third performances.
- Flodin had plenty criticism of the composition, but he especially singled out Nováček's performance. *“His playing offered up a mass of joyless things. From time to time there were terrible sounds, and it was impossible to fathom the composer's meaning, so great was the cacophony.”*
- Another criticism came from Joseph Joachim (1831-1907), a towering figure of late Romantic violin. He considered Sibelius' Violin Concerto *“scheusslich und landweilig”*, dreadful and boring. He never changed his mind.
- Sibelius withdrew the concerto and revised it, completing the new score by June 1905.
- Burmester offered his services again in 1904. He was passed over again, this time because Sibelius received an offer for stellar performers from his publisher.
- The premiere of the new version occurred October 19, 1905, in Berlin, with Karl Halir as soloist and Richard Strauss conducting the Berlin Philharmonic. (Halir had previously premiered Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto)
- This revised version is the one in the repertoire. In 1905 Sibelius forbade performance of the original version.
- Early reactions to both the Berlin premiere and subsequent 1906 performances in Helsinki, St. Petersburg and New York, were mixed and lukewarm.

- Among early champions of the concerto was a 17 year old Hungarian prodigy, Ferenc von Vecsay, who performed the work in Berlin and Vienna. Sibelius eventually dedicated the concerto to von Vecsay.
- Writing around this time, Sir Donald Tovey said, “*Perhaps the Violin Concerto of Sibelius has not yet had time to become popular.*” He then prophesied, “*but I can see no reason why it should not soon take place with (the concertos of Mendelssohn and Bruch) as one of the three most attractive concertos ever written.*”
- Eventually, beginning in the 1930s, the concerto was popularized by Jascha Heifetz, and acquired its place in the current repertoire. “*As in the case of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto, it took a long time before Sibelius’ work obtained its well-deserved place in the repertoire.*” (Erkki Salmenhaara)
- In 1990, Sibelius’ heirs allowed recording and performance of the original version.
- Most critics and scholars consider the revised version superior to the original.

#### OVERVIEW:

- MOVEMENT 1: *Allegro Moderato*; Sonata Form; D minor; 2/2, 6/4 & 4/4 meters.
  - In the score Sibelius marks 6 subsections in the movement: *Allegro Moderato, Molto Moderato Tranquillo, Allegro Molto, Moderato Assai, Allegro Moderato, Allegro Molto Vivace.*
  - NOTE: These subsections do NOT correspond to the musical narrative. They mark changes in meter or tempo, a frequent occurrence in the movement.
- MOVEMENT 2: *Adagio di Molto*; Ternary Form, A-B-A; B-flat major; 4/4 time.
- MOVEMENT 3: *Allegro ma non Tanto*; A-B-A-B; D-major; 3/4 time.

## MOVEMENT 1

#### EXPOSITION:

#### *Allegro Moderato*

#### THEME I COMPLEX: D-minor, 2/2 time

- A quiet ostinato in muted strings creates a shimmering musical background.
- Against this accompaniment solo violin presents a Theme I complex.
- Theme I is in three parts:
- PART I:
  - A lyrical, song-like extended melody. “*A sensitive, dreamy melody that introduces the voice of the soloist.*” (Steinberg)

- The melody is hauntingly echoed by a clarinet.
- The first three notes of the melody represent the most important motive of the movement: A rising-falling idea, a long note followed by a fast turn of phrase.
- PART II:
  - The theme takes a darker turn, with violin playing virtuosically, first on G string only, then on A string.
  - The G string motive is a jagged melody with a distinct dotted rhythm.
  - The A string motive is a smoother chromatic melody with a short-long rhythm.
  - NOTE: These two motives will be prominently featured in the Development.
  - Dark woodwind echoes and a quiet, steady tympani roll accompany. The shimmering strings are still there.
  - NOTE: There are 4 strings on the violin:: G – D – A – E (left to right; low to high)
- PART III:
  - In a series of rising scales, solo violin reaches an impassioned climax.
  - The climax is cut off abruptly by two fast, dissonant orchestral chords, as if the music is chopped by a pair of scissors.

#### MINI CADENZA BY SOLO VIOLIN:

- Solo violin presents a fast, virtuosic mini-cadenza.
- It begins with a burst of sixteenth note scales marked *veloce* (rapid) in the score. A quiet, steady tympani roll accompanies.
- “*This is fast and on one string, requiring continuous shifting.*” (Violinist Cottin-Rack)
- The cadenza continues with “*a super-violinistic recitation*” (Steinberg) of sixths & octaves, with frequent double-stops.
- The passage ends with a dramatic *crescendo*, the violin soaring up three octaves before handing the music over to the orchestra.
- NOTE: This brief cadenza at the very outset, announces the technical challenges for the soloist, a feature the concerto is well known for.

#### *Molto Moderato e tranquillo*

THEME II COMPLEX: B-flat major/ D-flat major; 6/4 time

Sibelius shifts to a different meter and a major key. Theme II is derived from Theme I. The initial presentation of the theme in low strings and winds is dark hued. The solo violin then delivers a stunningly beautiful, rhythmically altered version of the theme. Its emotional effect is so different that at first hearing, the tune seems unrelated to the earlier orchestral version. Finally, solo violin transitions with a preview of the Closing Theme.

- The dark hued Theme II melody (B-flat/D-minor) is initially *mf* in low strings and low winds, repeated twice.
- The orchestra then trails off, leaving bassoon and horns to quietly announce a variation on the tune that foreshadows the solo violin passage to follow.
- Solo violin enters in B-flat major, with an operatic scale that soars.
- It then presents the gorgeous version of Theme II in D-flat major, in a passage marked *affetuoso*, (affectionate, with tender warmth) in the score.
- The violin starts its song in high register and switches to low register as the tune winds down and fades away with *pizz* strings accenting the end.

#### TRANSITIONAL CADENZA:

- PART I:
  - Solo violin engages in a dramatic rising scale.
  - Violin then previews what will soon be the Closing Theme.
  - The accompaniment is a quiet pedal in strings and tympani.
  - The key area is still B-flat major, the meter 6/4.
- PART II:
  - Solo violin begins a sustained trill, on the E-string.
  - At the beginning of the trill, Closing Theme is echoed in *pizz* strings.
  - Solo violin echoes the *pizz* strings while holding the trill.
  - Brief transitional passage leads to the Closing Section.
  - NOTE: Solo violin is simultaneously holding a trill (E-string) & playing a melody (A-string). According to violinist Myriam Cottin-Rack this is actually fairly easy.
- NOTE: Strictly speaking this passage is not a true cadenza in that there is some orchestral accompaniment at all times. Yet many scholars refer to this passage as a cadenza.

#### *Allegro Molto*

#### CLOSING SECTION:

Meter changes to 2/2. Key area is B-flat minor. This dramatic section is assigned entirely to the orchestra. The soloist takes a break. The music is typical Sibelius, dark hued and bleak. It features two closing themes. A tiny bit of sunshine amid the desolation – presented by the woodwinds - is quickly crushed. The section comes to a morose, tragic end.

- Closing Theme #1, C1:
  - A loud dark hued melody in violins with full orchestral accompaniment.
  - The music has a thick texture, with steady pedals in winds & horns and a two-note ostinato in low strings.
  - The score asks for *marcatissimo*, very strong accentuation.

- Toward the end, the theme is highlighted by a trombone fanfare that adds a tragic touch to the music.
- Cheerful wind variation on C1:
  - A sudden bright spot, as if the clouds parted.
  - Flutes play a dance-like, rustic variation of the C1 theme.
  - Brass & tympani issue an abrupt response.
  - Now the entire wind section energetically takes up this bright tune.
  - Toward the end, the passage is accented by repeated brass/tympani gestures.
  - The passage ends with a crescendo toward a brass climax.
- Closing Theme #2, C2:
  - A *ff*, jagged, rising falling melody in trumpets & trombones appears at the climax. It re-establishes the tragic mood.
  - C2 reappears in horns in a *diminuendo* passage, the music exhausting itself.
  - A resigned, dejected, quiet variation of C2 appears in slow tempo in bassoons. It is a “*despairing cadence theme.*” (Tovey)
  - The dejected mood continues with the tune in basses, the music fragmenting and fading away in a *morendo* (dying) passage.
  - Thus the Exposition ends in a tragic note, “*in utter darkness.*” (Tovey)

### *Moderato Assai*

#### DEVELOPMENT:

Meter changes to 4/4. Key area G minor

The Development is brief but striking. It consists of a hitherto unprecedented gesture: the entire section is a solo violin Cadenza. The violin states variations of Theme I motives amid virtuosic figurations. Two motives in particular, both from Part II area easily audible. One of these is heard four times, the other twice.

- The Development Cadenza begins with a three octave rise of two notes, from low B to high B. It sounds like a scream or an outcry. “*A cry of protest...to the preceding turbulent climax.*” (Hurwitz)
- Solo violin then engages in a rapid series of arpeggios and scales, ending in a final soaring scale and a sustained a high D.
- Next is the first version of the A-string melody from Theme I Part II (A minor) in low register. The drop in register & minor key imbues the music with melancholy.
- A loud and abrupt, “*angry gesture*” (Tovey) from orchestra is reminiscent of the one that occurred in the Exposition.
- The violin responds with a series of fast arpeggios and scales, then re-states the A-string motive in variation.

- This is followed by an extended development of the G-string motive.
- Two more A-string motive variations follow.
- An extended development of the G string motive.
- A virtuosic passage with double and triple stops and difficult jumps up and down the strings returns key of G minor.
- The solo violin continues its recitation while bassoons initiate a sneaky Recapitulation in the bass.

### *Allegro Moderato*

#### RECAPITULATION:

Meter changes to 2/2. Recap begins in G minor.

The Recap consists of the same sequence of events as the Exposition. However every section is reworked and varied. The early mini-cadenza of the Exposition is replaced by a mini development section. The section ends with a brief Coda that ends the movement.

#### THEME I:

- PARTS I & II: Recap begins quietly with bassoons stating Theme I beneath ongoing solo violin figurations.
- Solo violin quietly takes up the theme in low register, bassoons switching to accompaniment. It embarks upon a more elaborate, embellished presentation of the Theme, the passage gradually becoming louder and more impassioned.
- PART III: Solo violin takes up a motive of the theme and, through a series of rising scales, brings it to a passionate climax. This passage is louder and more dramatic than its Exposition counterpart.
- The orchestra intervenes This is analogous to the abrupt, scissor-like gesture of the Exposition. Here in Recap, it is not abrupt. It is a new motive derived from the theme in low winds and horns, heralding a development of the theme.
- At this point in the Exposition, there was a mini-cadenza presented by Solo Violin. Instead a mini-development of the theme occurs in orchestra, “*a new and impassioned development with rich modulations.*” (Tovey)
- The new motive of Theme I is at first developed by horns and low winds.
- With a key change from G minor to D major, the music rises to a huge orchestral climax accentuated by loud trombone fanfares and tympani rolls.
- Music calms down in a *diminuendo* that leads to Theme II.

## THEME II:

- The theme is initially presented in a calm passage that settles the mood of the prior climax. The passage is somewhat developmental. It begins with a motive of the theme in oboe that is then echoed successively in strings and clarinet.
- NOTE: This calm section is the counterpart of the dark hued, turgid orchestral version in the Exposition.
- Solo violin enters with a *dolce* song that ends with soaring scale.
- Solo violin proceeds with the gorgeous *affettuoso* version of the theme. The passage begins in D major in high register, but then darkens to D minor in low register.
- Overall it is more elaborate and impassioned than its Exposition counterpart.
- The passage fades in a *diminuendo*.

## TRANSITIONAL CADENZA:

- The brief cadenza that announced the upcoming Closing Theme returns in D minor and 2/2 time (vs B-flat minor & 6/4).
- Solo violin plays an upward scale that soars.
- Solo violin previews Closing Theme, then enters a long trill.
- Beneath the trill, *Pizz.* strings echo the Closing Theme twice.
- NOTE: Unlike in the Exposition counterpart, Solo Violin simply maintains its trill and does not simultaneously echo the theme. The second echo is assigned to *pizz* strings.
- NOTE: As with the earlier version this is not a true cadenza. There is accompaniment by orchestra, albeit quiet.

*Allegro Molto Vivace*

## CLOSING SECTION &amp; CODA:

In this, the final section of the movement, there is no change in key or meter. They remain D minor and 2/2. The change is in tempo. Led by solo violin, the music suddenly picks up a fast, dance-like tempo that keeps up until the end. Unlike the earlier Closing Section which ended on a tragic note, this one is fast and upbeat.

- Solo violin suddenly picks up the tempo in a *crescendo*, engaging in fast, virtuosic figurations. The music sounds like a gypsy dance.
- Toward the end of its fast passage solo violin pre-figures Closing Theme C1.
- The cheerful wind variation of C1 appears in flute, then clarinet. Solo violin accompanies with fast, virtuosic figurations.
- Another fast, virtuosic passage from solo violin.
- The previously morose second Closing Theme C2 appears in low woodwinds, repeated twice. Solo violin accompanies.

- NOTE: Unlike its earlier version that ended the Exposition in a tragic note, this version of C2 is merely a recall, with no emotional impact.
- CODA: Solo violin engages in a rising scale at the end of which it recalls the main motive of Theme I. A fast passage with two more rising scales from violin brings the movement to an upbeat finale.
- Tovey, on the end of the first movement: *“brilliance is an inadequate term.”*

#### OVERALL COMMENTS:

#### CLASSICISM:

- The Sonata Form structure of the movement is proportioned in a way that harkens back to the Classical Era of Haydn and Mozart, Exposition and Recapitulation occupying most of it. The Development is relatively brief and the Coda, a tiny piece of concluding music.

#### ABOUT THE CADENZA:

- Sibelius was inspired by Mendelssohn’s Violin Concerto (1844).
- *“Cadenzas often give the feeling of being tacked on. Seldom have they been integral to the work.”* (Glenda Goss)
- Mendelssohn tackled this problem by placing his first movement cadenza at the end of the development. Sibelius takes it one step further, replacing the entire development with the cadenza.
- NOTE: The original 1904 version of the concerto featured two cadenzas, the second akin to a Bach chaconne, technically very difficult. In the final 1905 version this was deleted.
- *“The result was that the balance shifted: the cadenza – the true moment of violinistic flamboyance – became the centerpiece of the entire movement.”* (Glenda Goss)

#### DEVELOPMENT:

- Sibelius compensates for his substitution of a Cadenza in lieu of Development, by inserting various developmental passages into the Recapitulation. These collectively represent the “missing” development.

#### CLIMAXES:

- Hurwitz points out, *“the climax that goes wrong or self destructs,”* is a common feature of Sibelius’ music, a dramatic device he shares with Mahler.
- Examples: Climax at the end of the violin recitation of Theme I. Climax at the end of Closing section. Climax at the end of Theme I Recap.

## BALANCE BETWEEN SOLO VIOLIN & ORCHESTRA:

- The movement does not try to integrate soloist and orchestra in the manner of Beethoven or Brahms. The solo violin is clearly the dominant element of the movement, the diva.
- This is most evident in the very beginning where it states Theme I in a lengthy passage. The Development Cadenza and the various other mini-cadenzas add to this effect.
- *“He conceived ...the movement from the point of view of the broken hearted, thwarted violinist longing for the virtuoso career that would never be: the soloist plays almost non-stop from the first bar to the last.”* (Glenda Goss)
- The role of the orchestra in Exposition is limited to parts of Theme II & Closing Section. Recap begins in orchestra (bassoons) but solo violin soon takes over, leaving the orchestra to the role of a chorus that comments and reacts.

## SUBDIVISIONS OF THE MOVEMENT & FREQUENT METER CHANGES:

- Meter changes within a movement is a “modern” phenomenon, mostly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- In this regard the concerto is an early example of this trend.

## VIRTUOSITY AND TECHNICAL CHALLENGES:

- Examples of virtuosic demands include fast runs of scales, arpeggios and octaves, double and triple stops, and fast scales on a single string.
- Violinist Myriam Cottin-Rack points out that each one of these techniques is not, in and of itself challenging to professional violinists.
- It is the high frequency and fast tempo of these elements, often lined up back-to-back, that makes the concerto technically demanding.
- Furthermore the length of the movement, with its frequent technical passages, presents a major challenge to the stamina of the player.

## MOVEMENT 2

### INTRODUCTORY GESTURE:

- Clarinets state a brief melody based on a 3-note motive very similar to Theme I of Movement I, with an identical rhythmic profile.
- Melody repeated in oboe, sequenced up.
- Oboe begins another version, sequenced yet higher. This is taken up by the rest of the winds and extended.
- Brief transitional passage in bassoons.
- NOTE ON THEMATIC UNITY: This introduction will give rise to the main theme of Sections A & B of the movement. It is firmly tied to the first movement Theme I; therefore, so is the second movement.

A:

- **Theme A:** A lovely, lyrical song weaved *sonoro ed espressivo* by the solo violin.
- The main motive of Theme A, heard at the very beginning, is an inversion of the introductory gesture.
- The accompaniment is gentle and syncopated in winds and strings.
- In its second half the melody rises and becomes more passionate.
- It ends in a hesitant codetta, “*the musical equivalent of a shy stammer.*” (Hurwitz)
- The violin melody has been likened to the slow movement theme of Beethoven’s Piano Concerto #5 (Hurwitz).
- “*The world and gestures evoked are the world and gestures of Beethoven.*” (Steinberg)
- “*A deep throated song of almost Tchaikovskian melancholy.*” (Downes)
- “*Sibelius never found – perhaps never sought – such a melody again.*” (Steinberg)

B:

- **Theme B in orchestra:** The introductory clarinet theme appears as a dark hued melody in strings. It is sequenced up.
- **Theme B’:** A *fortissimo* brass/wind response, is a countermelody derived from Theme B.
- About B’, Hurwitz: A “*brilliant interjection of the trumpets in that high, piercing register that Sibelius always turns to when he wants to create extreme tension.*”
- This series of melodies, Theme B – B sequenced up – Theme B’ repeat in variation. B’ is extended.
- **Theme B’ in solo violin:**
  - Violin enters with its own extended version of B’. The passage is dark hued and at times dissonant.
  - This passage features two melodies played simultaneously, one in duple meter, the other in triple meter. It is one of the more challenging passages of the concerto.
  - “*But it comes across, hopefully, as purely beautiful and totally natural.*” (Hurwitz)
  - “*A duet integrated to the violin part.*” (Myriam Cottin-Rack)
- **Transition:** music rises on a polyphonic passage. Orchestra presents a melody derived from Theme A motive, while the solo violin engages in virtuosic scales.

A’:

- **Theme A returns in orchestra:** The lengthy song by solo violin in the first A section returns in variation, mainly in orchestra.
- The melody is presented by the horns. Solo violin accompanies with scale figurations and arpeggios. It begins as a restless, agitated passage that rises in a *crescendo*.
- Music calms on a solo violin interlude with a series of triplets based on Theme A motive.

- Interlude continues with Theme A motive quietly in horns, the music accented by falling figures in high woodwinds that sound like birdcalls.
- Orchestral presentation of Theme A comes to a rousing conclusion after a slow *crescendo*.

#### CODA:

- Music falls to *mf*, and the solo violin states the “shy, stammering” codetta of the first A section.
- Solo violin briefly restates Theme A, *dolce*, in a passage that recalls the beginning of the movement.
- A horn chorale ushers in concluding remarks by the solo violin that slowly fade away.
- The movement ends poignantly with solo violin rising to and holding a high C while orchestral strings utter two plagal cadences (“Amen” cadences).
- “*A brief, poetic coda.*” (Hurwitz)

#### COMMENT ABOUT THE MOVEMENT:

Burnett James: “*There is a note of nostalgia in this slow movement that is quite uncharacteristic of Sibelius.*” He interprets this as the composer’s melancholy over his shattered dream of becoming a violin virtuoso.

### MOVEMENT 3

The movement was revised by Sibelius from Rondo to Sonata Form without a development. Thus it can be viewed as: A – B – A’ – B’

A: D-major, 3/4 time

- Begins with a “*chugging rhythm*” (Hurwitz) in strings and tympani. This will be the ostinato that accompanies Theme I.
- Theme I on solo violin, marked *energico* in the score, is a fast, dance-like melody with a characteristic rhythm derived from the ostinato that accompanies it.
- Solo violin presents the theme first in low register, then in high.
- In order to make the theme audible, the accompaniment is cut to chamber music size: 2 violas, 2 cellos, a single bass and tympani. They all play softly.
- This tune was famously described by Sir Donald Tovey as a “*polonaise for polar bears.*”
- A brief counter melody in low register is followed by virtuosic figurations by solo violin ending in a trill.
- VIOLINIST COTTIN-RACK ABOUT THE DEMANDS OF THIS PASSAGE:
  - It gets more difficult as the passage progresses, especially in the counter-melody.

- Fast runs of scales, a staccato rising scale at m 27 (tough to execute properly), constant string crossings, all one after the other in a short time.
- “*You don’t have time to breathe.*”

B: G-minor – D major; 3/4 time

- Introductory gesture: The mood abruptly changes as orchestra takes over in G-minor, low winds and horns previewing the upcoming theme, while strings declare a new ostinato with a distinctive rhythm.
- Theme II is presented by low strings. It is another dance-like melody but with a dark hue.
- HEMIOLA; AN ASIDE:
  - The rhythm of this melody alternates between twice three & thrice two.
  - The “thrice two” part of the melody is called a *hemiola*. It is a temporary change in the beat from triple to duple, usually accomplished by a change in the time value of the notes.
  - A *hemiola* is a rhythmic illusion. It gives the listener an impression of a change in meter even though this is not so.
  - Tovey, about this rhythm: “*known to Couperin, Bach and Handel as that of triple time with the ‘hemiole’, as in a French courante, but taken by Sibelius at a pace...altogether shocking to eighteenth century dancers of courantes.*”
  - The *courante* is a slow, triple-meter dance from the Renaissance & Baroque. It was popular in France and Italy. The French version frequently employed hemiolas.
- Theme II Variation 1: Solo violin picks up the tune in a brief, dynamic, syncopated variation.
- Theme II Variation 2: Solo violin proceeds with its own version of Theme II in double & triple stops. Despite the embellishment, the melody remains faithful to the orchestral version.
- A brief passage of fast, virtuosic solo violin figurations follows.
- Key change, back to D-major. Music quiets and a motivic fragment of Theme II appears in various instruments groups while solo violin weaves rapid arpeggios.
- The section ends with a massive orchestral climax. Amid the blaring brass & tympani rolls, winds and string preview Theme I that is to come.

A’: D major; 3/4 time

- The climax abruptly gives way to the solo violin which restates Theme I, with a steady beating accompaniment in strings. This is the high register version.
- The chugging accompaniment of the earlier A section returns as solo violin moves on to the low register version of the theme.
- The remainder of Theme I in solo violin is vigorous and virtuosic, and faithful to the earlier version.

- A' is shorter than its earlier version. It ends a small *crescendo*. The momentum of the music continues on, toward B'.

B': D minor; 3/4 time

- Orchestra takes over with a key change to D minor and re-states the introductory gesture, previewing Theme II.
- Theme II: Stated by bassoon (G major) with a persistent chugging rhythm in orchestra. Solo violin accompanies in high register.
- HARMONICS, AN ASIDE:
  - The solo violin in accompaniment sounds like it is whistling a birdsong.
  - This is accomplished with a technique entitled artificial harmonics.
  - It is rare, so called Natural Harmonics being more common.
  - The passage is difficult to play. Another technical demand on the player.
- Theme II Variation 1: Brief solo violin variation (D minor), marked *affettuoso* (affectionate, with tender warmth) in the score; slightly altered from its earlier version.
- Theme II Variation 2: The full re-statement of Theme II (D minor) by solo violin actually starts in orchestra with an antecedent to which the violin replies.
- Solo violin proceeds with an extended recitation of Theme II. This is also varied from its earlier version.
- Momentum continues with virtuosic solo violin figurations. These involve fast runs of 16<sup>th</sup> notes, double stops that require big stretches of the fingers,
- The passage ends with a key change to D major. "*Now the tonality turns defiantly major.*" (Hurwitz)
- Solo violin climaxes with dramatic *fortissimo* double stops and lands on a *fortissimo* high D. The climax accented by the full orchestra.
- VIOLINIST COTTIN-RACK, ABOUT THE DEMANDS OF THIS PASSAGE:
  - "*Throughout these fast runs, articulation is a major challenge.*"
  - "*It is difficult to project high notes with the violin, especially when the orchestra is also playing.*"
  - "*Rehearsals 11 & 12 are very virtuosic and forte or fortissimo. A little bit cruel!*" (Rehearsals 11 & 12 in the score represent the last 2/3s of the passage)

CODA: D major

- Begins with a dramatic slow crescendo, accompanied by solo violin figurations.
- Orchestra repeats the rising music louder. "*Brilliant proclamations in brass and tympani suggest a happy ending.*" (Hurwitz)
- Fast solo violin scales alternate between major and minor. "*The soloist protests, seesawing indecisively between major and minor in a series of tipsy chromatic scales.*" (Hurwitz)
- Solo violin soars to a final climax, accented by three loud concluding orchestral chords.

### COMMENTS ABOUT THE THIRD MOVEMENT:

- Tovey: *“With less than fifty lines of full score, the finale achieves gigantic proportions and brilliant high spirits without banality.”*
- Layton: *“The whole finale has an infectious and irresistible sense of momentum, and even an inferior performance never fails to rivet the attention of an audience.”*
- Downes: *“There are incredibly difficult passages of thirds, arpeggios, harmonics, double-stops, and the whole battery of violinistic fireworks.”*
- Tomi Mäkelä, referring to the often quoted “Polonaise for polar bears” remark of Tovey: *“There are no polar bears in Finland... The expressive character of the dance rhythm is by no means Nordic, but rather a mixture of polonaise and tarantella.”*

### FINAL COMMENTS:

#### FROM VIOLINIST MYRIAM COTTIN-RACK:

Some violin music, e.g. Paganini Caprices, is composed mainly for technical challenge. These are usually short pieces, difficult to master but not demanding on the endurance of the player.

A concerto is not supposed to be about technicality but rather about aesthetic beauty. Sibelius’ Concerto stands out as encompassing both. It is especially difficult because of its length, posing serious challenges to the stamina of the player.

No wonder that Victor Nováček who premiered the piece, a violinist of inferior caliber, was reported to be *“red faced and perspiring”* and fighting *“a losing battle with the solo part.”*

The level of violin playing at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was not as advanced as it is nowadays. There were only a small handful of performers then, who could tackle this concerto. Currently, given contemporary education and practice, a wide variety of violinists can handle it.

*“I can just imagine how shockingly novel and difficult this concerto would have been to those who encountered it in the early 1900s. Now it is not.”*

#### OTHER COMMENTS:

*“Apart from Grieg, it is the only Nordic concerto to have attained classic status and universal popularity.”* (Robert Layton, referring to Grieg Piano Concerto of 1868)

*“A failed violin virtuoso is responsible for what has surely become the most popular violin concerto of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”* (Ledbetter)