



# JEAN SIBELIUS

Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47  
Humoresques, Opp. 87 & 89

# NORS S. JOSEPHSON

Celestial Voyage

FENELLA HUMPHREYS violin  
BBC NATIONAL ORCHESTRA OF WALES  
GEORGE VASS conductor

BBC  
RADIO



Jean Sibelius (1865–1957)

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Fenella Humphreys *violin*  
BBC National Orchestra of Wales  
Nick Whiting *leader*  
George Vass *conductor*

About Fenella Humphreys:

*'Strong-toned, easy fluidity and immaculate technique'*  
Gramophone

*'Golden precision and effortless virtuosity'*  
The Scotsman

Jean Sibelius (1865–1957)

**Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D minor, Op. 47**

- |                          |         |
|--------------------------|---------|
| 1. Allegro moderato      | [16:34] |
| 2. Adagio di molto       | [8:55]  |
| 3. Allegro, ma non tanto | [8:12]  |

**Humoresques, Op. 87**

- |                                 |        |
|---------------------------------|--------|
| 4. Humoresque I: Commodo        | [3:46] |
| 5. Humoresque II: Allegro assai | [2:20] |

**Humoresques, Op. 89**

- |                                 |        |
|---------------------------------|--------|
| 6. Humoresque III: Alla gavotta | [4:24] |
| 7. Humoresque IV: Andantino     | [3:32] |
| 8. Humoresque V: Commodo        | [3:12] |
| 9. Humoresque VI: Allegro       | [3:26] |

Nors S. Josephson (b. 1942)

- |                             |        |
|-----------------------------|--------|
| 10. <b>Celestial Voyage</b> | [8:52] |
|-----------------------------|--------|

Total playing time [63:16]



### Jean Sibelius Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47

As spellbinding concerto openings go, Sibelius pulled some proper magic out of the bag for the first few bars of his Violin Concerto in D minor: orchestral violins alone, mutes on and split four ways, rocking back and forth over pairs of notes from the D minor triad, one group undulating onto a note as another undulates off it, all of which conjures up a softly shimmering, expectantly hovering world over which the solo violin then floats out a coolly mysterious, harmonically ambiguous, long-lined melody beginning in its upper registers, answered briefly in kind by a single low, dark clarinet.

That's a lot of nuts and bolts score analysis with which to begin a supposedly accessible sleeve note, but in this instance it feels more than warranted given the degree to which those exquisite first few moments represent a perfect distillation of everything to be celebrated about this concerto. Also indeed about Sibelius himself as he began work on it in 1902, in his late thirties.

For starters, there's the degree to which these bars evoke Finland's natural landscape and ancient folklore. Indeed even had you

never clapped eyes on a vast, fir-tree-surrounded Finnish lake at dawn with the mist resting over it, this music would be painting something similar in your mind's eye; and it was exactly this quality, heard in previous works such as the tone poems *Finlandia* and *En Saga*, which by 1902 had already won Sibelius status as his country's foremost composer; not least because it offered the Finns a much-needed cultural identity at a time when they sat under the rule of the Russian Empire. It also represented a world which was about to save Sibelius from himself. In 1900 he and his wife Aino had lost their youngest child to typhoid, after which his always-heavy drinking transformed into a darker and financially ruinous alcoholism. This was reaching crisis point by the time the concerto was being penned, fuelled by the constant temptations of living in Helsinki, but thankfully Sibelius knew this too. So, shortly before he finished the concerto in early 1904, he bought a plot of land for a new family home close to Lake Tuusula, where he could be both inspired and protected by nature.

Equally important is the opening's celebration of the violin and its colouristic capabilities, because Sibelius knew and loved this instrument with a passion, to the extent that his original career plan hadn't been as

a composer at all, but as a virtuoso violinist, before studies at Helsinki Music Institute revealed compositional talents that outstripped his violinistic ones. In fact the concerto's very existence feels like a minor miracle in itself – that far from letting this disappointment drive an eternal wedge between him and his instrument, he instead went on to gift to it with the only concerto he would ever write, and indeed throw himself into the process as much as a violinist as a composer. 'Janne has been on fire...' wrote Aino at the beginning of 1904. 'He has such a multitude of themes in his head that he has been literally quite dizzy. He stays awake all night, plays incredibly beautifully, cannot tear himself away from the delightful melodies.'

Moving on from those first bars, the violin is also placed centre stage in the concerto's unusual first movement structure, because whereas the soloist's cadenza would usually fall near the end – where its function is chiefly one of virtuosic display – this one instead falls at the movement's middle, actually taking the musical argument forwards by acting as a sort of solo development section, albeit one still high on virtuosity. Indeed virtuosity is the final point worth

making on the violin writing, because to say that Sibelius the Frustrated Virtuoso didn't hold back on putting the soloist through their paces is something of an understatement, and not simply in terms of the technical challenges presented by its outer movements – feats such as double-stopping in octaves, or the formidable fingering, bowing and intonation level required of its many rapid, leaping passages. There's also the issue of how to hold securely and musically to your lines through orchestral textures that often give you little to hold onto from either a rhythmic or melodic perspective. What's more, the version we know today is slightly easier than what Sibelius first premiered in 1904, when an unconvincing soloist, and the realisation that the score needed tightening up, prompted him to replace it with a 1905 revision.

Then, while the work's mighty orchestral tutti climaxes sound very much of their Romantic-era time, it's also full of strikingly lucid chamber-weight passages which themselves pull an equal dramatic punch, especially for Sibelius's harnessings of the various instruments' ranges and timbral colours to his theatrical advantage.

We've already discussed the shimmering violins at the opening, but there's also his

use of the darker, more elemental-timbred, brooding instruments. Take the way the first movement cadenza concludes not with the full orchestra crashing in, but instead with a dark bassoon creeping in to entwine itself into the soloist's dark recasting of the opening floating theme. Or earlier on, before the cadenza, when the violinist suddenly finds itself fighting in the dark, its fast, leaping and falling figurations played out against a hushed, menacing stillness from slowly snaking low clarinets and bassoons, underpinned by held notes from rumbling timpani, horns and double bass. In the context of this being only three years before Mahler would premiere his 'Symphony of a Thousand' – so named because of the number of performers demanded of its lavish scoring – this was distinctly counter-cultural.

That lucid, colouristically-genius scoring is then directed towards entirely different ends for the Adagio – a movement which, while it carries the odd note of darkness, is ultimately an unabashedly ardent love letter to the violin. This opens with a hushed pair of clarinets, whose wistfully rising and falling figure in thirds is imitated by a pair of oboes, before a further, suddenly assertive upwards reach from the oboes is affirmed by the two flutes. However, this is soon tempered by the hushed, brooding

roll of timpani, before the violin enters with a tender, sensual, long-lined theme which is accompanied by a four-part chorale from the horns, combined with gentle pluckings from the cellos and violas.

The highly rhythmic and energetic finale then mirrors the folk-dance flavour heard in the violin concertos of Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Beethoven and Bruch, while also being a distinctly darker and heavier beast, especially with its off-kilter syncopations. Certainly you can hear why the twentieth-century musicologist Donald Tovey described it as 'a polonaise for polar bears'. For the solo violin, it's a sink-or-swim technical fireworks display, swooping and diving at speed from its highest to its lowest registers by means of double-stopping, pizzicato and glissandi, with no lifelines coming from the orchestra's direction, right up to the triumphant finish where it eventually climaxes on one triumphant, sforzando high D, joined in affirmation by unison horns, strings and timpani.

### **Jean Sibelius: Two Humoresques, Op. 87 & Four Humoresques, Op. 89**

In terms of solo violin writing, the concerto appears to have largely scratched the itch for Sibelius for the following decade. However, 1915 saw a sudden flurry of works for solo



violin and piano, with his Four Pieces, Op. 78 (completed 1919), Six Pieces, Op. 79, Sonatina in E, Op. 80, and Five Pieces, Op. 81. It also saw a dream, recorded in his diary, that he was a twelve-year-old concerto soloist. So perhaps it was inevitable that the following year he began work on a second work for violin and orchestra – his Six Humoresques, completed in 1917, which as with the concerto required a formidable level of technique.

Although these miniatures are spread over two opus numbers, this was actually a mistake. In reality they were conceived as a set and intended to be performed as a whole; and while each can stand on its own, when heard as a group they do end up sounding surprisingly akin to a sort of mini concerto, despite there being no thematic connections between them.

As for the broad brushstrokes of their sound world, on the one hand, their charming, gossamer-weighted whimsy very much hits the classic brief for a humoresque, of a lively, capricious piece. However, there's also a thoroughly Sibelius-flavoured Nordic, folkloric darkness to their daintiness, complete with the violin writing itself often having a folk-fiddle quality to it, which brings to mind Sibelius's own description of himself – in a letter of 1910 – as 'An apparition from the woods' (much as the context of that

letter was a slightly bitter one, connected to feeling under-appreciated by audiences outside Finland).

On to the detail, and the first, leisurely-tempo'd opening Humoresque feels almost like a fond backwards glance to the concerto. Firstly due to its D minor tonality. Secondly due to its scoring, because while this is the only one of the set which features the full orchestra, as with the concerto it's the upper strings alone who are tasked with setting the stage for the soloist, albeit this time lower down and with the violas also in the mix, matching the darker and more sultry tone we then hear from the soloist entering on their lowest string. From here, there's a haunting, shadowy melancholy to the soloist's capricious lines, accentuated further by an offbeat lilt created by combining a three-beats-to-a-bar time signature with unusual phrase lengths.

We lose the woodwind for the fast second Humoresque, which is a virtuosic tour de force for the soloist, with its mercurially swirling semiquavers, leaps between its highest and lower registers, and fast alternations of bowed and plucked notes. Also striking are further shadows of the concerto. For instance there's more of the key of D – officially major-tonality this



time, but flitting impishly into minor and modal territories. There's also the ghost of the concerto's second, strident theme in its strong offbeat rhythms.

The lively strings-only third Humoresque in G minor then opens with a distinctly otherworldly, elfin tinge thanks to some genius scoring – orchestral violins alone once more, but this time split six ways and uttering delicate glissando gasps. To this Sibelius then adds an antique-y dance suite quality by casting as a gavotte, with its lifted step.

The G minor fourth is likewise a strings-only affair, but now in dreamily introspective, tender and melancholic mode, with more harmonic ambiguity. Still, while the tempo is slowed and the accompaniment one of sustained chords, the violinist doesn't get a break. Instead it's a tale of rhapsodic shifts between long lines and fast figurations, bowed and plucked notes, leaps and double-stops. The violin's final bar is delicious – three pizzicato quavers out from which spring three bowed, leaping puck-like harmonics.

For the fifth we're dropped instantly and unmistakably into the forest via a swooping, minor-keyed cuckoo call from the violinist, answered by the flutes and underpinned

by sustained chords from the clarinets and bassoons, before perkily chugging strings spark a buoyantly carefree and hummable melody from the violin, whose virtuosités include a leap up to its very highest registers to imitate whistling.

Clarinets drop out for the darting and mercurial number six, whose rhapsodic ducks and dives from the violin are underpinned by an orchestral perpetuum mobile. Still, despite the ticking urgency and the Humoresque's climactic position in the set, its ending is both sudden and whispered – as though the fairy-tale creatures have melted back into the woods.

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#### Nors S. Josephson: Celestial Voyage

I was agreeably surprised to be asked to write a work for violin and orchestra. I was a violinist and played in orchestras in the USA so had acquired a working knowledge of the violin's technical possibilities. My initial reaction was that I would need time to consider what to write but, in fact, ideas came freely and *Celestial Voyage* took only a few weeks to complete in 2019.

As the piece evolved in my mind, I knew I was dealing with contrasting sonorities.

Indeed, the violin was beginning to take off into the stratosphere!

In my professional career I had taught rock n' roll and in this genre, there was a special type called Space Rock, which emerged in late 1960s psychedelic and progressive rock bands. Perhaps I took the music of David Bowie and other famous rock compositions as my reference for this work. In programmatic terms my partner, Olga, was envisioned to be shooting through outer space in a rocket visiting the outer edges of our galaxy. When she reached the perimeter, she wanted to return home but the way back was tortuous. She finally makes it back and, in jubilation, I wrote a cadenza for the soloist to express my happiness for her safe return. I dedicated *Celestial Voyage* to Olga.

Perhaps something subliminal rose in me when I discovered that my work would share this recording with Sibelius. My father was Swedish and my grandmother had dark hair so could very well have come from the Far North. My music may share certain characteristics with Sibelius (I have, after all, published extensively on Sibelius), but I was unaware of this possible connection until I heard the work in rehearsal. It was not on my mind to include any of Sibelius's musical

traits or mannerisms while composing the piece.

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#### Acknowledgments

Sincere thanks to  
Nors S. Josephson  
George Steven  
Edward Clark

Recorded in association with the  
United Kingdom Sibelius Society  
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Produced in association with BBC Radio 3  
and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales

BBC  
RADIO



## Fenella Humphreys (violin)

Winner of the 2018 *BBC Music Magazine* Instrumental Award, violinist Fenella Humphreys enjoys a busy career combining chamber music and solo work. She has broadcast for the BBC, Classic FM, and German, Canadian, Australian and Korean radio and TV.

A champion of new and unknown music, a number of eminent British composers have written works for Fenella. During 2014/15 she premiered a set of six new solo violin works by leading British composers including Cheryl Frances-Hoad, Sally Beamish and Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, with performances at Aldeburgh, and the St Magnus and Presteigne festivals. She has been fortunate to record these works on two critically acclaimed discs for Champs Hill Records, both discs chosen by *BBC Music Magazine* as Instrumental disc of the month (October 2015 and January 2017) with five-star reviews, and the second also picked as Editor's Choice in *Gramophone* magazine.

Concertmaster of the Deutsche Kammerakademie, Fenella also enjoys guest leading and directing. As a chamber musician, she has collaborated with artists including Alexander Baillie, Adrian Brendel, Pekka Kuusisto, Nicholas Daniel, Sir John Tomlinson

and Martin Lovett, and is regularly invited by Steven Isserlis to take part in Open Chamber Music at the International Musicians' Seminar, Prussia Cove. Fenella can also be found playing Tango with the great Uruguayan bandoneonist, Héctor Ulises Passarella.

Her teachers have included Sidney Griller CBE, Itzhak Rashkovsky, Ida Bieler and David Takeno, studying at the Purcell School, Guildhall School of Music and Drama and the Robert-Schumann-Hochschule in Düsseldorf graduating with the highest attainable marks. Fenella plays a beautiful violin from the workshop of Peter Guarneri of Venice, kindly on loan from Jonathan Sparey.

## George Vass (conductor)

Described by BBC Radio 3 as 'the saviour of contemporary classical music', respected English conductor George Vass studied at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and the Royal Academy of Music, London. He was appointed Artistic Director of the internationally renowned Presteigne Festival in 1992. Vass made his professional conducting debut at St John's Smith Square in 1979 and, as Artistic Director of the Regent Sinfonia of London and Orchestra Nova, has appeared at many of the UK's major concert halls and festivals.

As a guest conductor he has worked with ensembles including the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, the Bournemouth Symphony, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Royal Scottish National and Ulster orchestras, Amsterdams Promenade Orkest, Konzertensemble Salzburg, London Mozart Players, Malmö Opera Orchestra, the choirs of Royal Holloway, Merton College Oxford and Schola Cantorum Oxford. He has broadcast for BBC Radio 3 and Channel 4 television.

Vass has made over thirty commercial recordings for Dutton, Champs Hill, Guild, Lyrita, Naxos, Resonus Classics, SOMM and Toccata Classics.

Founder Artistic Director of Nova Music Opera, he premiered Thomas Hyde's *That Man Stephen Ward* (2008; revival in 2015), Sally Beamish's *Hagar in the Wilderness* (2013), Stephen McNeff's *Prometheus Drown'd* (2014), Cecilia McDowall's *Airborne* (2014), Charlotte Bray's *Entanglement* (2015) and Joseph Phibbs' *Juliana* (2018). Having also conducted Britten's *Curlew River* (Hampstead and Highgate Springfest, 2009; Nova Music Opera, 2013) and Holst's *Savitri* (English Music Festival, 2010).

Over the last quarter-century he has commissioned and premiered new work

from such eminent composers as Sally Beamish, Martin Butler, Gabriel Jackson, Paweł Łukaszewski, David Matthews, John McCabe, Cecilia McDowall, Paul Patterson, Joseph Phibbs, Robert Saxton, Peter Sculthorpe, Huw Watkins and Hugh Wood.

Recent highlights include a critically acclaimed recording of James Francis Brown's choral and orchestral music for Resonus Classics, *Sweeney Todd* at Dartington and the much-lauded premiere of Joseph Phibbs' chamber opera *Juliana* at the Cheltenham Festival.

George Vass is an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music, was chair of the British Arts Festivals Association from 2014 to 18, he was presented with the 2018 BAFA Exceptional Service Award for his outstanding contribution to the UK festival sector. From 2016 to 2019, he served the Royal Society of Musicians of Great Britain as a governor and treasurer, and in 2017 was given a BASCA Gold Badge Award marking his support for the UK song writing and composing community.

## BBC National Orchestra of Wales

For over 90 years, the BBC National Orchestra of Wales has played an integral part in the cultural landscape of Wales, occupying a distinctive role as both a broadcast and national symphony orchestra.

Part of BBC Wales and supported by the Arts Council of Wales, it performs a busy schedule of live concerts throughout Wales, the UK and the world. The orchestra is an ambassador of Welsh music, and champions contemporary composers and musicians.

The orchestra performs annually at the BBC Proms and biennially at the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World competition, and its concerts can be heard regularly across the BBC – on Radio 3, Radio Wales and Radio Cymru.

BBC NOW works closely with schools and music organisations throughout Wales and regularly undertakes workshops, side by side performances and young composer initiatives to inspire and encourage the next generation of performers, composers and arts leaders.

## Nors S. Josephson (composer)

Born on 14 July 1942 in Palo Alto, California, USA, Nors S. Josephson received his PhD in Historical Musicology at the University of California, Berkeley in 1970. He worked as Assistant Professor in Music at Smith College, Massachusetts (1971–75) and subsequently Professor of Music at California State University, Fullerton (1975–92).

In 2004, he published a large essay in *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* on the sketches and drafts for Sibelius's Eighth Symphony.

In addition, his completions of Bruckner's Ninth Symphony (recorded by the Aarhus Symphony Orchestra under John Gibbons) and Mussorgsky's opera *Khovanshchina* are published by Carus Verlag and Peters Edition.

As a composer, Josephson has a substantial catalogue. His *St Matthew Passion*, for soloists, choir and orchestra was premiered on Good Friday 2015 by Mozartchor Speyer and the Heidelberg Kantatendorchester under Dieter Hauß.

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Recorded in BBC Hoddinott Hall, Cardiff on 29–30 January and 24 February 2020  
Producer & editor: Adam Binks  
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Session photography © Resonus Limited  
Recorded at 24-bit/192kHz resolution

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