

In the 1950s, Mercury records established its musical reputation largely with two intense, exciting European conductors performing miracles in the American provinces: Antal Dorati in Minneapolis, and Paul Paray in Detroit. With the less potent Howard Hanson advocating American music in Rochester, Dorati took most of the Austro-German, Hungarian, and Russian repertory, with Paray treating the French literature as far more than leftovers. Paray's interpretations were generally faster and more sharply pointed than those of the period's two other great French conductors, Charles Münch and Pierre Monteux. His Mercury recordings are the high point of a long, distinguished career spent largely away from the world's most prominent podiums.

As a child, Paray studied with his father, a church musician, and at 17 he briefly served as a church organist in Rouen. France enjoyed a strong tradition of composer-organists, so perhaps it was inevitable that Paray entered the Paris Conservatory in 1904 as a composition student; in 1911, his cantata Yanitza earned him the Prix de Rome. Drafted during World War I, he was taken prisoner by the Germans and wrote a string quartet during his internment.

After the war, performing drew more of his attention than composing. He took a job conducting the orchestra of the Casino de Caunterets, and in 1920 made his Paris debut with the Lamoureux Orchestra as a last-minute substitution for André Caplet. Soon he became assistant conductor of the ensemble, and was named its principal conductor in 1923. In 1928 Paray took over the symphonic concert series in Monte Carlo; in 1932 he became conductor of the Concerts Colonne, a tenure he held until the Nazis temporarily disbanded the orchestra in 1940, and then again from 1944 to 1952. During the Second World War, he fled south and conducted in Monte Carlo and Marseilles.

Paray had made his U.S. debut in New York in 1939, and it would be in America that he achieved his greatest renown. In 1952 he was named music director of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, where he remained until 1963. Though not one of the world's sleekest ensembles, the Detroit Symphony under Paray's hands became noted for its snap and fire, especially through the recordings it made for Mercury. These LPs focused largely on French music, although Paray acquitted himself admirably with other works, including a Schumann cycle. The recorded performances tended to be bracingly fast (especially the Saint-Saëns "Organ" Symphony and Franck D minor Symphony), yet Paray's phrasing was supple and witty, and the orchestra played with great precision, high energy, and light heart. For decades these 1950s recordings, particularly of Ravel and various light overtures, inspired great affection among collectors.

After his departure from Detroit and return to France, Paray continued to conduct sporadically. At the age of 91 he led a concert in Nice to celebrate Marc Chagall's 90th birthday, and at 92 he made his last American appearance, with the orchestra of the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

Paray never solidly established himself as a composer, although he produced a number of substantial works before his Detroit appointment. These include two full symphonies (1935, 1940), sonatas for violin and cello, the ballet Artémis troublée (also performed as a symphonic poem under the title Adonis troublé), and a Mass for the 500th Anniversary of the Death of Joan of Arc, first performed in Rouen in 1931 and recorded in Detroit in 1956. His style was traditionally diatonic, and very much in the manner of the academically-oriented early twentieth century French composers, including D'Indy and his followers.

SIBELIUS

SYMPHONY NO. 2

PAUL PARAY conducting the DETROIT SYMPHONY



The Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 43, by Jean Sibelius was started in winter 1901 in Rapallo, Italy, shortly after the successful premiere of the popular Finlandia, and finished in 1902 in Finland. Sibelius said, "My second symphony is a confession of the soul."

Baron Axel Carpelan, who gave Sibelius' well-known tone poem Finlandia its name, wrote to the composer shortly after its successful premiere: "You have been sitting at home for quite a while, Mr. Sibelius, it is high time for you to travel. You will spend the late autumn and the winter in Italy, a country where one learns cantabile, balance and harmony, plasticity and symmetry of lines, a country where everything is beautiful – even the ugly. You remember what Italy meant for Tchaikovsky's development and for Richard Strauss." Although Baron Carpelan was penniless, he raised sufficient funds for Sibelius to stay in a mountain villa near Rapallo, Italy. Here, Sibelius jotted down the first notes to his second symphony.

More than a year after the first motifs were penned, the second symphony was premiered by the Helsinki Philharmonic Society on 8 March 1902, with the composer conducting. After three sold-out performances, Sibelius made some revisions; the revised version was given its first performance by Armas Järnefelt on 10 November 1903 in Stockholm.

Oskar Merikanto exclaimed that the premiere "exceeded even the highest expectations."

While critics were divided following the symphony's premiere, the public generally admired the piece as its grandiose finale was

connected by some with the struggle for Finland's independence, so that it was even popularly dubbed the "Symphony of Independence", as it was written at a time of Russian sanctions on Finnish language and culture. Sibelius's reaction to this has been widely debated; some claim that he had not intended any patriotic message and that the symphony was only identified by others as a nationalist composition, while others believe that he wrote the piece with an independent Finland in mind. Finnish composer Sulho Ranta said, "There is something about this music — at least for us — that leads us to ecstasy; almost like a shaman with his magic drum."

The symphony has been called "one of the few symphonic creations of our time that point in the same direction as Beethoven's symphonies." However, Virgil Thomson wrote in the New York Herald Tribune that the symphony was "vulgar, self-indulgent, and provincial beyond all description." Sir Colin Davis quoted Wordsworth for one of his recordings of the symphony with the London Symphony Orchestra:

Grand in itself alone, but in that breach
Through which the homeless voice of waters rose
That dark deep thoroughfare, had Nature lodged
The Soul, the Imagination of the whole.
Structure

SIBELIUS

SYMPHONY NO. 2

PAUL PARAY conducting the DETROIT SYMPHONY

1 Allegretto 8:36

2 Tempo Andante, Ma Rubato 12:29

3 Vivacissimo 5:23

4 Finale: Allegro Moderato 12:47

Total Time: 39:15

Recorded by Mercury Records 1960 in the Henry And Edsel Ford Auditorium, Detroit
Engineer – C. R. Fine Engineer [Co-Engineer] – Robert Eberenz
Producer [Musical Director] – Harold Lawrence
Producer [Recording Director] – Wilma Cozart



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