

Like so many Russian musicians, Mravinsky seemed first headed toward a career in the sciences. He studied biology at St. Petersburg University, but had to quit in 1920 after his father's death. To support himself, he signed on with the Imperial Ballet as a rehearsal pianist. In 1923, he finally enrolled in the Leningrad Conservatory, where he studied composition with Vladimir Shcherbachov and conducting with Alexander Gauk and Nikolai Malko. He graduated in 1931, and left his Imperial Ballet job to become a musical assistant and ballet conductor at the Bolshoi Opera from 1931 to 1937, with a stint at the Kirov from 1934. Mravinsky gave up these posts in 1938, after winning first prize in the All-Union Conductors' Competition in Moscow, to become principal conductor of the Leningrad Philharmonic. He remained there until his death, long ignoring many guest-conducting offers from abroad. Under Mravinsky's direction the Leningrad Philharmonic came to be regarded as one of the finest orchestras in the world, although the world had comparatively few opportunities to hear it aside from the rare tour (about 30 performances in 25 years, starting in 1956), some dim Soviet recordings, and a very few highly acclaimed records for such Western European companies as Deutsche Grammophon and, in the end, Erato. Mravinsky was made People's Artist of the U.S.S.R. in 1954, and in 1973, he received the order of Hero of Socialist Labor. But his more lasting international acclaim came for his performances of Mozart, Beethoven, Bruckner, Wagner, Sibelius, Bartók, Stravinsky, and anything Russian or Soviet. His reputation only rose upon his retirement from the Leningrad Philharmonic.



Mravinsky's rehearsal manner was said to be autocratic and brutal, and the resulting performances were tightly clenched. Yet they were also technically precise, finely detailed, subtly colored, and highly dramatic -- and this not always because he was in the habit of whipping fast finales into a frenzy. His readings had an intensity, concentration, and -- despite the arduous rehearsal -- spontaneity comparable to those of Wilhelm Furtwängler. In the West, Mravinsky was particularly noted as an interpreter of Shostakovich, whose Fifth, Sixth, Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth symphonies he premiered, and of Tchaikovsky. His recordings of the Tchaikovsky's last three symphonies, made in 1960 for Deutsche Grammophon while the orchestra was on tour in London, are touchstones of the Russian repertory.



Evgeny Mravinsky

conducts the

Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra

Sibelius

Symphony No. 7

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The Swan of Tuonela

Recorded Live

Conceived in one sole movement, the Symphony No. 7 is a triumphant display of "organic-thematic growth," with melodies and rhythms blending into one another, giving birth to new elements and branching out to develop in passages reminiscent of symphonic movements. Sibelius's last symphony was given its first performance in Stockholm on 24 March 1924 and was first heard in Finland in 1927. In the mid 1980s, Unitel began recording a complete cycle of Sibelius symphonies with Leonard Bernstein and the Vienna Philharmonic. Bernstein's death in 1990 unfortunately cut short this project after the release of Symphonies Nos. 1, 2, 5 and 7. They were recorded live at Vienna's Musikvereinssaal and were the object of stellar reviews. Bernstein, in the words of a leading Austrian daily, "painted a canvas of late-romantic splendor with the Philharmonic's sound - the incomparable brilliancy of the strings, the glowing intensity of the brass - in a way that only the greatest conductors can." (Symphony No. 1) And in its review of the Second Symphony, a major Viennese newspaper wrote: "For the sake of Jean Sibelius, Leonard Bernstein leaps with fanatical zeal into the heaving waves of late romantic emotions." It is not surprising that Leonard Bernstein felt so passionately about Sibelius's music. In many respects, it strikingly parallels that of Gustav Mahler. In fact, Sibelius's oeuvre is seen along with Gustav Mahler's as the most important symphonic legacy between late romanticism and modernity. And as Mahler's glowing advocate, Bernstein was suited like none other to disseminate the music of his great colleague Jean Sibelius.

The Kalevala is a collection of folk poetry from Northeastern Finland and Archangel Karelia (Russia), compiled by Elias Lönnrot (1802-1884). The original collection, from 1835, consisted of 32 cantos, but Lönnrot expanded it to 50 in 1849, to fashion the popular version that would later inspire Sibelius to compose several works, including the Lemminkäinen Suite: Four Legends from the Kalevala. The central character of the stories is Lemminkäinen, a sort of Finnish mythological figure, somewhat along the order of Don Juan. The Swan of Tuonela is the third of the four Legends and has been called the composer's first bona fide masterpiece.

It begins in a somber mood, the music depicting the Swan singing as it serenely glides atop the river -- a river where one senses hovering mists and an eerie quiet. The English horn has a prominent part here, playing the lovely, melancholy main theme (the Swan singing), a creation whose exoticism and mesmerizing character impart both a sense of loneliness and of soothing consolation. The music intensifies midway through, but cannot quite generate enough momentum to break away from the ethereal and mystical mood established at the opening. The English horn returns in the latter half to sing its music again, but the mood darkens further, especially in the string writing, which favors the violas, cellos, and lower ranges of the violin, and divulges a sort of funereal manner. Lasting 9 to 10 minutes, The Swan of Tuonela is probably the finest of the four Legends from the Kalevala.

Sibelius

Symphony No. 7

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The Swan of Tuonela

Evgeny Mravinsky
Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra

- 1. Symphony No.7 In C Op.105 20:52**
- 2. The Swan Of Tuonela No.3 Op.22 9:30**

Recorded by Melodyia Live in the Grand Concert Hall of the Moscow Conservatoire, February 1965
Engineer – Alexander Grossman



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