

ARCTIC ARCADIAN

THEODORE CHANLER

ADMIRERS of Sibelius admit, rather proudly, that his musical ideas are often insignificant in themselves. Their pride in this fact derives from its linking Sibelius in their minds with other great composers who were able to do much with little. They adduce as evidence of ingenuity and deep cerebration the manner in which his themes take on new shapes and functions in the course of a work. They will cite the *Largo* of the *Fourth Symphony* as an example of the masterly way Sibelius withholds the definitive version of his theme until it has first appeared in various tentative forms. The opening pages of the *Seventh* also provide fair sport for analysts of the theme-hunting school. The fragmentary phrase for horns (measures 3 - 5) appears later in the passage for divided strings. The wood-wind phrase (measure 8):



is split up and transformed as follows:



That such evidence of mental activity should justify a comparison between Sibelius and Beethoven is of course absurd. For though the latter occasionally employs themes whose possibilities only a musician of Beethoven's imagination could foresee, the final result is to make us realize that what at first may have seemed insignificant was in fact a fertile seed. But with Sibelius, when all has been said, the themes too often remain the trite, inert little entities that they appeared to be from the start. This quality of triteness and inertia, this lack of impulsion in the ideas themselves, sometimes leads Sibelius into juxtaposing them with a kind of inconsequential humor that is not without charm. This may be noted in the opening pages of the finale of the *Third Symphony*.

As further evidence of intellectual breadth and vigor, Sibelius enthusiasts point to the large scope of his designs. The tonality of the *Seventh Symphony* is in fact established with something that resembles classic deliberation. Yet the result is acoustically far from satisfying. The two full cadences in C-major preceding the entrance of the trombone theme in that key are heavy and abrupt and the second one in particular, occurring only ten measures before the trombone's entrance, definitely mars its effect. The passage for divided strings mentioned above is furthermore totally devoid of harmonic or contrapuntal interest. All the accompanying voices sound continuously with never a comma or breathing spell to show independence of line. This does little to help the melody in its already laborious attempts to leave the ground. Nothing, in short, seems to get under way. The intentions are perhaps admirable, but the execution is uninventive and heavy-handed and manifests little of the shrewd calculation one would expect from this celebrated "granite skull."

Another example of heavy-handedness in carrying out routine procedures is the modulation from C to E- $\flat$ in the section of this symphony marked *Allegro moderato*. The new key is approached through a series of descending bass progressions on which theme-hunters could doubtless expatiate at length. Before finally establishing the tonality of E- $\flat$ there occurs the following passage, exemplifying the classic procedure of hesitation before final affirmation:



The passage is of no particular importance, yet is perhaps worth noting for the characteristic clumsiness with which it fulfils its function, and especially for the depressing flatness of the new key when it arrives. Examples of similar thickness in the disposition of harmonies (chromatic thirds deep in the bassoons) could be multiplied indefinitely. They prob-

ably constitute the main reason why so much of Sibelius' music records badly. Further on in the same section occurs a striking example of faulty orchestration:



The trill on B- $\flat$ in the violas obscures, for no discernible reason, the entrance of the bassoon on the same note.

III

George Moore, in one of his *Conversations in Ebury Street*, amused himself by pointing out solecisms in the style of Thomas Hardy. This was in Hardy's case a somewhat fussy and ineffective mode of criticism since it left so much that is genuinely powerful and alive in Hardy's writings unaccounted for. A catalogue of similar lapses in Sibelius would however leave little to justify his reputation as the master-symphonist of our day.

That there should be evidence of thought in this music but at the same time small evidence of genuine musical impulse might lead one to suppose that his approach to the art were somehow synthetic or artificial. But there is too much of an atmosphere of "deep feeling" about it all to confirm this hypothesis. Moreover were his aim an "artificial" one it is likely that he would employ more "art" in attaining it. But the thick, clumsy writing, the inflated rhetorical proportions, the harmonic clichés and lack of melodic or contrapuntal interest all point to something much more singular, something mistakenly "personal" and subjective in his approach.

This is not an era for legends, and their rarity makes them all the pleasanter to cherish. There is much that is sympathetic, or at least impressive, in the legend of Sibelius, the lonely Titan of the North, re-incarnating in sub-zero weather the spirit of Classic Greece; a scholar and a recluse who has devoted his life to the arduous labor of creation, accepting acclaim without seeking it and revealing, all in all, many noble and uplifting traits. He is described also as an ardent nature-lover. This predilection may possibly offer some key to his music which, viewed as a

whole, suggests nothing so much as an elaboration of the "nature-mood" esthetic. Irving Babbitt, in his book *Rousseau and Romanticism*, writes with shrewd psychological penetration on the dangers of "this imaginative melting of man into outer nature." The artist who indulges to excess in Arcadian reverie will tend to identify the moods thereby induced with Nature herself and so to exalt them into something that touches on an Absolute. Babbitt has no objection to such reverie so long as it be kept in its proper place. "My quarrel," he writes, "is only with the esthete who assumes an apocalyptic pose and gives forth as a profound philosophy what is at best only a holiday or week-end view of existence." Further he quotes a passage from Rousseau that may have some bearing upon Sibelius (it is at any rate suggestive of much of his music). "'Beloved solitude,' Rousseau sighs, 'beloved solitude where I still pass with pleasure the remains of a life given over to suffering. Forest with stunted trees, marshes without water, broom, reeds, melancholy heather, inanimate objects, you who can neither speak to me nor hear me, what secret charms bring me back constantly into your midst? Unfeeling and dead things, this charm is not in you, it could not be there. It is in my own heart which wishes to refer everything back to itself.'"

It would be rash to impute to Sibelius the sceptical egoism that Rousseau so candidly avows. But it seems likely that similar – though not always as pessimistic – emotions may have led him at times into some form of mystical illusion. Music has certain sensitive properties thanks to which it may take on the tone and mood of a dramatic situation or even assume by analogy the meanings of a text with which it has been allied. It is furthermore well known that commonplace musical ideas may become associated in one's subjective mind with moods and emotions that have chanced to coincide with them in experience. There is, as I have said, too strong an atmosphere of "deep feeling" about the music of Sibelius to warrant calling it artificial, despite its lack of dynamic impulse. But it is by no means impossible that chance musical secretions, occurring in conjunction with nature reveries, may have become impregnated in his mind with the exalted tone of these reveries in much the same way that butter will take on the odor of any strong-smelling object that is placed near it. This property of butter makes it useful in the manufacture of perfume. But presumably it must be good butter. The music of Sibelius

is hardly the "best butter;" nor is its quality improved by a doubtful aroma of false mysticism.

The astonishing popularity of this music is perhaps due chiefly to its Arcadian appeal. On the other hand, the lack of selectivity that inevitably results from an intense subjectivism is likely to produce a good many clichés, and the presence of these is always reassuring to the popular mind. Thus, in Sibelius, meditations for Hans Sachs mingle with travel-worn echoes of distant Spain, spring songs for Donald Duck and other familiar items; and the ungainliness of the style, if perceived at all, is accepted as a necessary adjunct to the impressiveness of the manner.