

Silvestrov, Silent Music

"Music is still song, even if one cannot literally sing it: it is not a philosophy, not a world-view. It is, above all, a chant, a song the world sings about itself, it is the musical testimony to life." -- Valentin Silvestrov

The Ukrainian composer Valentin Silvestrov was born in Kiev in 1937. He came into the world in the year of the "Great Terror," when many of the Soviet Union's artists and thinkers were murdered by Joseph Stalin and his *apparatchiks*, certainly the darkest decade of the Ukraine's long history. By most estimates, 80% of the cultural elite of Kiev were arrested that year; most perished in prisons and concentration camps. Silvestrov came relatively late to music and composition, beginning study at 15, first privately and then at an evening music school. Like a good young Soviet, he enrolled at the Kiev Institute of Construction Engineering after graduation; but three years later could no longer deny the pull of creation, and began the serious (and in that political climate, the very dangerous) pursuit of music at the Kiev Conservatory. From his very earliest works, Silvestrov was drawn to the dramatic potential in contrasting strong tonality with strong atonality, the sonorities and emotions of the old styles with those of the avant-garde; in his massive Third Symphony "*Eschatofoniya*" (1966), this preoccupation with polarities took the form of "cultural" (strictly notated) sounds and "mysterious" (improvised) ones. The place of magic and invocation -- those elements that always defy material, that appear in the act of composition and the act of performance -- became central aspects of Silvestrov's music.

It is this dramatic tension that draws me to Silvestrov's pieces, along with their beauty and sincerity. There is a limpid transparency to all his work, a sense of nostalgia without sentimentality. Where the experience of listening to a lot of new music can be a challenge, and an intellectual puzzle, Silvestrov's music feels like opening a box of old family photos: Altered by the ravages of time, indistinct, sometimes ruined, but still haunting and recognizable, and transfigured by the composer's deft hand. It is easy to hear the "world singing itself its own song" in this music. His string quartets, his songs, and his masterful symphonies all radiate with the slow steady force of a rotating planet, spinning alone in the void. The notion that these vast, lethargic bodies sing to themselves as they turn, and we hear their music as a symphony or song cycle, admittedly carries an aspect of Romantic fancy to it. But the image also voices a serious metaphor for Silvestrov -- the concept of "meta-music," a music which hovers around, above, and especially after all other musics, like an atmosphere encircling a post-apocalyptic globe. Silvestrov has written much about the idea of "coda" and "epilogue" in his music, that place in which there is "a gathering of resonances, a form which is open." This coda-state is for Silvestrov "not the end of

music as an art, but the end of music, an end in which it can linger for a very long time. It is very much in the area of the coda that immense life is possible." Hence Silvestrov's "metaphorical style" from the 1970s onwards, as embodied in tonight's concert, in the 3 pieces of *Silent Music*: a body of slow, lovely, and astoundingly detailed "postludes," emanating the air of a Mahler adagio through vast waves of time and subtle decay.

Sibelius, Violin Concerto

Long-time HPO subscribers will know by now of my intoxication with the music of Jean Sibelius. In a sense, he occupies a place in orchestral music similar to that of Silvestrov, although he is vastly better known – especially in Sibelius' later works, his unique and instantly recognizable musical voice straddles the line between tonality and atonality, the beautiful and the new, with originality and sincerity.

It is no coincidence that the music of Sibelius often brings to mind that of another famous Scandinavian composer, Edvard Grieg: Both have enjoyed success to the point of familiarity across generations of listeners, especially with their most nationalistic works. Grieg's "*In the Hall of the Mountain King*" and "*Morning Mood*" from the incidental music for *Peer Gynt* have achieved household status paralleled only by Mozart's "*Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*" and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. While Sibelius' *Finlandia* may not have quite the same notoriety or melodic earworms as *Peer Gynt*, its anthemic brass exhortations herald the broad, open soundscapes for which Sibelius is best loved.

Interestingly, both composers came upon their nationalistic voices somewhat second-handedly. Grieg was not exposed to Norwegian folk music and culture until he was a young adult, an experience which would forever alter his sense of purpose and his aesthetic as a composer. Sibelius, too, grew up speaking the language of the cultural elite: Swedish - the language of Finland's commerce, government and education, and a result of centuries of Swedish rule - not Finnish, the mother-tongue and the language of the people. Though he attended Finland's first Finnish-language secondary school, he did not seem to regard Finnish language and culture with any great interest. His fervor and immersion in Finnish eventually emerged during his friendship with the staunchly pro-Finnish Jarnefelt brothers (composer Armas and painter Eero) and more significantly their sister, Aino, who became Sibelius' wife.

Mirroring the dichotomy of his cultural life, Sibelius struggled with a lifelong pull between the established academic and Germanic musical traditions in which

he was schooled, and his rebellious and almost primitive tendencies against them. The latter manifested throughout his music in the form of unorthodox treatments of triadic harmonies, classical structures, and orchestral colour. With his newfound folk-infused palette, Sibelius was able to take this further: traditional development gave way to obsessive, dervish ostinatos; counterpoint was set aside for melodies more modally flavoured; pedal-points and soundscapes of great breadth were favoured over traditional harmonic development and juxtaposition.

The D minor violin concerto, which is the only concerto Sibelius ever wrote, is surely his most well known composition, and a high-water mark of his ability to combine his Germanic training with his nationalistic idiosyncrasies. The folk-like implorings of the opening solo entrance ride atop the tonal plane of a quietly static string section. The first movement careens through more and more impassioned solo octave beseechings, calming in its dialogue with the earthy echoes of a viola, then reinvigorating until a prolonged orchestral *tutti* itself journeys from fury to darkness. Out of this emerges the solo cadenza, striking in its stead for a more traditional development section. A darkly lyrical second movement, a study in woodwind duets yet still suffused with deep brass utterances, finds its greatest intimacy in moments of unfinished phrases, the violin itself seemingly too overwhelmed to continue, collecting itself as the orchestra quietly buoys it along. Solo and *tutti* reenergize together, swelling ecstatically, and then subsiding into ephemeral delicacy wherein we finally disappear. What follows is perhaps one of the most guttural and energized dance-allegros of the repertoire, described by Sir Donald Francis Tovey famously as "a polonaise for polar bears." In his last tip to tradition, Sibelius concludes in the major tonic in a celebratory display of virtuosic fireworks, though not without a few last sweeps of Baltic brass atop which the violin cascades into its final electrifying squall.

Beethoven, Symphony No. 3

People who talk and write about music are prone to flights of hyperbole, purple prose and exaggeration; nonetheless, it is impossible not to describe Beethoven's "*Eroica*" Symphony as a genuine watershed masterpiece, one that marks a turning point in the history of modern music. After the period of inner turmoil he described in the Heiligenstadt Testament of October 1802, when he struggled to come to terms with his impending deafness, Beethoven began to engage more seriously with large works and explicitly extra-musical ideas. The decision to embark on a 'Bonaparte symphony' arose from his own emotional state and the political situation in Europe at that time. It is worth noting that the

'political symphony' already existed as a genre in Post-Revolutionary France; part of Beethoven's genius was to personalize the political symphony. The 'Eroica' was conceived as a tribute not to the idea of revolution but to the revolutionary hero, Napoleon, and really to Beethoven himself. The infamous story of how Beethoven flew into a rage upon hearing that Napoleon had crowned himself Emperor, and furiously scratched Bonaparte's name off of the symphony's dedication page, is borne out by the evidence of the actual sheet of paper in question, bearing the marks of Beethoven's fury and disillusionment. Later concert-goers have been able to respond to Beethoven's heroic quests and spiritual journeys in a way they could never respond to celebrations of long-past political ideologies.

More is generally known about the composition of this work than about any other by Beethoven. Unusually, his sketches show a minimum of false starts and detours. The most radical ideas were present from the start, if in cruder form, and work seems to have proceeded with great assurance. This is striking, for however familiar you are with Beethoven's evolving style up to 1803, nothing prepares you for the scope, the astonishing originality and almost continuous technical certainty manifested in this symphony. In sheer length, Beethoven may well have felt that he had overextended himself, for it was many years before he wrote another instrumental work of like dimensions.

In the first movement, there is an expansion in dimensions on every level – the Third Symphony became the longest symphonic work ever written up to that point in time, indeed almost twice as long as any of its antecedents. What was even more radical than its scale was Beethoven's projection of melodic detail into the total form – the large and small scale musical ideas mirror each other, like a fractal pattern. The moving thematic 'liquidation' at the end of the second movement *Marcia Funebre* (funeral march), the sudden duple-time bars in the da capo of the third movement scherzo, the novel structure of the finale, the powerful fugatos throughout – all of these appeared in this symphony for the first time, as if out of nowhere.

The most radical aspect of the *Eroica* sets it, along with Beethoven's later symphonies, far apart from the 18th-century tradition (including Beethoven's own First and Second): It is the impression of a psychological journey or growth process through the length of an entire multi-movement piece. In the course of this voyage, *something* seems to arrive, triumph, transcend. This illusion is helped by certain other characteristic features: 'evolving' themes, transitions between widely separated passages, actual thematic recurrences from one movement to another, and last but not least, the involvement of extra-musical ideas by means of a literary text, a programme, or (as in the '*Eroica*') just a few tantalizing titles.

And it is this combination of his musical dynamic, now extremely powerful, and extra-musical suggestions that invests Beethoven with what can only be called an ethical aura. Even the great 19th Century critic Donald Tovey, a zealous adherent of 'pure music', was convinced that Beethoven's music was 'edifying'. Concert-goers of the 19th and 20th centuries gladly attached programmatic suggestions to those symphonies that lack them: to the Fifth, Beethoven's alleged remark about fate knocking at the door, and to the Seventh, Wagner's less happy evocation of an apotheosis of dance.

This is what the *Eroica* represents: The simultaneous realization and creation of a new symphonic ideal, and the development of the technical means to implement it, probably Beethoven's greatest single achievement. It transformed the symphony into the Romantic genre *par excellence*, and in a stroke crystallized the image we hold today of Beethoven, the musical warrior, engaging in titanic struggle, and ultimately emerging in triumph and glory.