

OCTOBER 2025 • MASTERWORKS #2

## Beethoven & Sibelius – October 17- 19, 2025

The mid-19th century witnessed the emergence of a nationalist movement in music, as composers sought to portray the sounds of their homeland. Modest Mussorgsky and Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov were two of “The Five” (a group of self-appointed composers) who wanted to create a distinctly “Russian sound” in music. Their contemporary, Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky, composed in the same tradition. Richard Wagner was identified with the German “sound” and Frédéric Chopin made his musical mark with compositions that embodied the sound of Poland. The first nationalist composer of Czechoslovakia was Bedřich Smetana, while Edvard Grieg used his music to convey his love of Norway. Jean Sibelius achieved for Finland what the others had accomplished for their homelands. Moreover, because several of his works were inspired by Finnish literature, his name became synonymous with the nationalist movement in Finland. He became the first Finnish composer to reach an international audience.



Sibelius

Sibelius was born on December 8, 1865, in Hämeenlinna, in the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland, then part of the Russian Empire. He was born Johan Christian Julius but called “Janne” in memory of his father’s uncle, Johan “Janne” Sibelius. His father, Christian Gustaf Sibelius, was a doctor who served as the City Medical Officer, and his mother, Maria Charlotta Borg, cared for young Sibelius, his sister Linda, and his brother Christian. Sibelius’ first language was Swedish, the language of the aristocratic and professional class, and though he eventually learned Finnish, he spoke Swedish at home throughout his life.

Sibelius’ father died of typhoid fever in 1868 during a severe famine, leaving the family in desperate economic straits. They lost their home, and went to live with Sibelius’ maternal grandmother, Katarina Borg. Sibelius traced his childhood love of music to memories of lying under a square-shaped out-of-tune piano while his mother played, visualizing the sounds he heard. Hearing the poorly tuned instrument had a profound impact on his musical life. He told his biographer,

**“When I was a child, we had a square piano which was about three-quarters tone flat. When we got a new piano with normal tuning, everything shattered. I felt alienated from the piano and moved to the violin.”**

His aunt Julia was his first piano teacher and taught him to read music, but Sibelius was a restless and challenging student, who preferred to improvise and play what he wanted. He began student life at a Swedish preparatory school but was invariably placed under the teacher’s desk as a punishment for his tendency to be absorbed in his own world. His grandmother became his teacher, and with her he studied Greek and Latin. Sibelius’ early life included idyllic summers with his paternal grandmother, Katarina Frederika Sibelius and his aunt Evelina Sibelius in the town of Lovisa. He roamed the forests and meadows for days on end and became an avid reader. He was particularly fond of a Finnish poet, Runeberg, and loved reading the Finnish epic, the *Kalevala*.



Sibelius

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Sibelius

As a youngster of ten, Sibelius composed music for himself and his siblings (Linda and Christian) and conducted from the piano. Although his earliest instrument was the piano, he began to play violin at age nine. By 15, he was determined to become a great violin virtuoso. In 1885, upon completing high school,

Sibelius moved to Helsinki with his mother and sister, and to please his family, he began the study of law. But he soon followed his heart and enrolled in the Helsinki Music Institute (now the Sibelius Academy) where he studied from 1885 to 1889. While he played violin throughout his life, his dream of becoming a violin superstar was abandoned when, as a student, he unsuccessfully auditioned for a violin position with the Vienna Philharmonic. The rejection led to the painful awakening that he had “begun training too late for the exacting career of a virtuoso.” Composition soon became his main interest, and he focused his studies on theory, counterpoint and harmony.

In 1886, while a student, Sibelius discovered his uncle Johan’s “visiting cards,” and realized that the uncle for whom he had been named used the French spelling Jean rather than Johan. Sibelius promptly changed his name to Jean, proclaiming, “Jean is now my musical name.”

In the winter of 1889, his friend and classmate, Armas Järnefelt, who also became a well-regarded composer and conductor, invited Sibelius to his family’s home and introduced Sibelius to his sister, Aino. The Järnefelt family was an influential force in the Finnish National Romantic movement, and Aino’s siblings included not only her brother, Armas, but her brothers Arvid (who became a writer) and Eero (a respected painter). While at first there was some resistance to Sibelius as a husband for Aino (which required that they become engaged in secret), her father ultimately relented. Sibelius and Aino were married on June 10, 1892, and they had six daughters: Eva, Ruth, Kirsti (who sadly passed away at an early age), Katarina, Margareta and Heidi.

In his mid-20s, before his marriage, Sibelius left Finland to continue his composition studies in Berlin and Vienna. By the time of his marriage in mid-1892, Sibelius had already achieved recognition as a composer. Upon his return to Finland in 1891, the performance of his first large-scale work, the *Kullervo Saga*, created a sensation. The composition is a symphonic poem for soprano, baritone, male voice choir and orchestra. The subject matter draws from the *Kalevala*, a 19<sup>th</sup> century epic poem of Finnish folk tales. His most famous work, the tone poem *Finlandia*, was written in 1899 and was revised in 1900. Although it has become symbolic of the Finnish national movement, the piece was written to help raise cash for a Helsinki press pension fund, and was played as the finale of a pageant celebrating Finnish history and culture. It did rouse nationalist support for Finland and, for that very reason, the piece was banned by Russian Tsar Nicholas II.

Despite his artistic success, Sibelius had great difficulty managing his finances. Sibelius was a heavy drinker and well-known cigar smoker, who always seemed to be in debt. Aino earned money through the translation of French literature, which likely helped the family survive. By 1897, just five years after their marriage, Sibelius was so well-established as Finland’s leading composer, that the Finnish Senate voted to grant him a small pension for life, in recognition of his outstanding genius, thus providing him with a limited but stable source of income. It was also intended as a form of compensation for his failure to secure the coveted position of Professor of Music in Helsinki. Private benefactors also helped, but the composer’s chronic alcoholism and poor fiscal management put a constant strain on his health and his marriage.



Ainola: Home of Sibelius and Aino

In 1903, the Sibelius family moved into a large wooden villa that was built for them in the forests along Lake Tuusula, located in Järvenpää, just north of Helsinki. The house was named Ainola in honor of

Sibelius' wife, Aino. It was a peaceful and beautiful place where Sibelius could relax and compose, while juggling his many trips to England, Italy and Bohemia. Sibelius adored the forests surrounding the home and, when he travelled, he carried a small matchbox filled with moss from the grounds so that he could always be near the "smell of nature." While he wanted his daughters to study music, he would not allow them to practice at home lest it disturb the quiet he needed to compose. They took piano lessons and practiced at the home of their neighbors.

Between 1899 and 1924, Sibelius composed seven symphonies and also wrote some chamber works, including his String Quartet in D minor. In 1925 he composed the score for a 1925 production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Other orchestral works included *En Saga*, his Violin Concerto, and several symphonic poems including *Tapiola*, commissioned by Walter Damrosch for the New York Symphony Society. It was the great violinist, Jascha Heifetz who brought Sibelius' Violin Concerto to global acclaim, and it remains one of the great violin concertos in the repertoire. The piece has been recorded by many artists, including Hilary Hahn and Leonidas Kavakos. In 1929, Sibelius wrote an 8<sup>th</sup> symphony, but it has never been performed. Rumor has it that the composer was so dissatisfied with the work that he destroyed the manuscript in the late 1940s.

Given his nonstop cigar smoking, it is no surprise that Sibelius was diagnosed with throat cancer in 1907, requiring a series of surgeries that began in 1908. He was ultimately cured and was able to tour Europe presenting his works. He embarked on a similar tour of the United States in 1914, conducting the premiere of the tone poem *The Oceanides*. Sibelius would have likely pursued a second tour of the United States, but for the intervention of the First World War.

In the Spring of 1918, Finland was torn by civil war and murders, committed by rogue bandits not authorized by the revolutionary leadership, were common. The southern part of the country was controlled by the revolutionary forces and, concerned that harm might befall Sibelius and his family, the revolutionary leadership placed armed guards around Ainola to ensure that the family was safeguarded.

The last two decades of his life were spent in relative quiet in Ainola. Despite the seclusion, Sibelius remained a figure of immense influence. During this time, as he had throughout his life, Sibelius remained consumed by dark moods, brooding depression, and periods of heavy drinking. But even though he was out of public view, he remained one of the most popular composers of the time. Sibelius' fame was



Sibelius



*Sibelius and Aino Reading at Home*

enhanced by a series of gramophone records of his music. In the 1930s, listeners of a US radio station voted him the most popular composer in the world.

His 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1955 was celebrated with worldwide concerts, reaffirming his status as one of the great composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On September 20, 1957, Sibelius passed away from a brain hemorrhage and was buried at Ainola. His wife continued to live in the house they built together until her passing on June 8, 1969. Today, Ainola is a museum, open to the public and December 8<sup>th</sup>, the composer's birthday, is celebrated as the Day of Finnish Music in Finland, honoring the great contributions of the composer.

## JOIN US!

**Please join the HSO on October 17 - 19, 2025, to enjoy an exciting performance of Sibelius' Symphony No. 2, the *Helios Overture* by the Danish composer Carl Nielsen (a contemporary of Sibelius), and Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 with featured soloist Drew Petersen, all under the baton of HSO's guest conductor, Viswa Subarraman.**

**Did you borrow this *Prelude*? Get your own free copy! Whether you're a ticket buyer, donor, curious about the music, or know someone who is, just send an email to [dshulansky@hartfordsymphony.org](mailto:dshulansky@hartfordsymphony.org). We'll make sure you receive *Prelude* by email, in advance of each HSO Masterworks concert!**

## Interested in listening to more music by Sibelius? Try these suggestions:

Listen to this thrilling performance of Sibelius' Violin Concerto performed by Ray Chen with the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Kent Nagano, which explains why this piece has remained at the top of the world's greatest violin concertos:

[SIBELIUS Violin Concerto in D minor, Op. 47 - Ray Chen - YouTube](#)

Enjoy this performance of *Finlandia*, performed at the opening of the new music hall in Helsinki:

[Sibelius - Finlandia op. 26 \(Opening of the new Helsinki music hall\)](#)

For something a bit different, enjoy this performance of the Sibelius String Quartet in D minor by the Nordic String Quartet:

[Jean Sibelius - String Quartet in D-Minor op. 56, Voces Intimae. Nordic String Quartet \(HD\)](#)

Here is a performance of Sibelius' tone poem, *The Oceanides*, the piece that was premiered in the composer's 1914 visit to the United States by the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra in 1997:

[Jean Sibelius' tone poem The Oceanides](#)

You may recognize the beautiful melody of Sibelius' *Valse triste*, performed by the Estonian Festival Orchestra under the direction of Paavo Järvi:

[Jean Sibelius - Valse triste / Paavo Järvi / Estonian Festival Orchestra](#)



## WONDERING HOW THE MUSIC OF OUR FEATURED CONCERT WILL SOUND? Try HSO'S LISTENING GUIDE, with links to the pieces you'll hear on our concert stage!

Enjoy this performance of Carl Nielsen's *Helios Overture*, performed by the Danish National Symphony:

[Carl Nielsen's HELIOS OVERTURE // Danish National Symphony Orchestra & Fabio Luisi \(LIVE\) - YouTube](#)

Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 is performed by Daniel Barenboim, with the Staatskapelle Berlin, conducted by Zubin Mehta and includes a special opening surprise:

[Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 3 | Daniel Barenboim, Zubin Mehta & the Staatskapelle Berlin](#)

Please watch the performance of Sibelius' Symphony No. 2 by the Frankfurt Radio Symphony, under the direction of Susanna Mälkki:

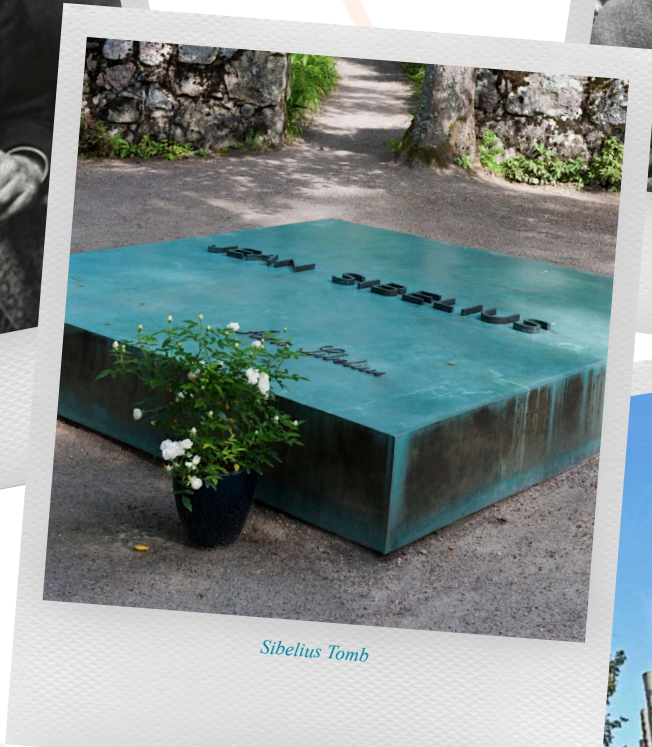
[Sibelius: 2. Sinfonie - hr-Sinfonieorchester - Susanna Mälkki - YouTube](#)



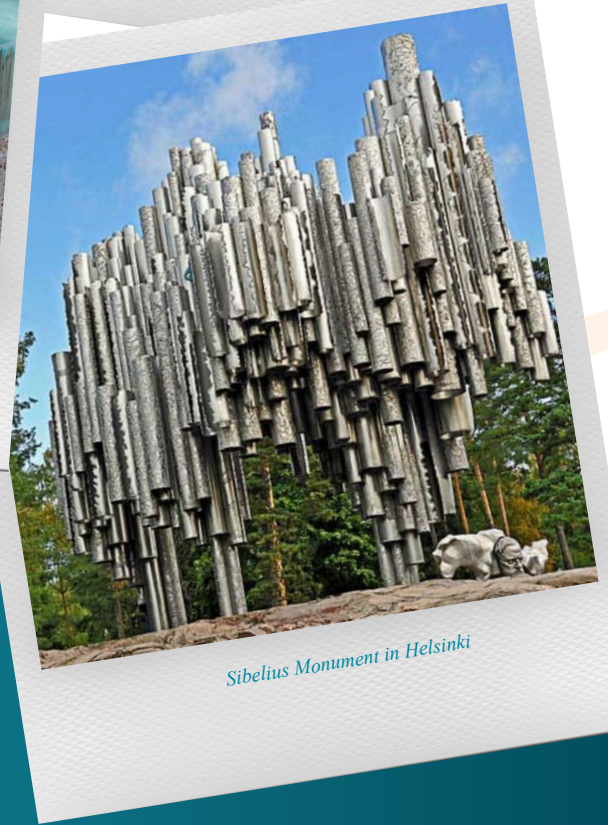
Sibelius



Sibelius



Sibelius Tomb



Sibelius Monument in Helsinki

## SOURCE MATERIAL

[Jean Sibelius | Finnish Composer & National Icon | Britannica](#)

[Jean Sibelius - World History Encyclopedia](#)

[Jean Sibelius | San Francisco Classical Voice](#)

[Finnish Composer Jean Sibelius - World History Edu](#)

[Jean Sibelius | Encyclopedia.com](#)

[Jean Sibelius, 1865—1957 World Famous Finnish Composer - Swedish Finn Historical Society](#)

[Sibelius: 15 facts about the great composer - Classic FM](#)

[Notes on Jean Sibelius \(1865–1957\) and His Works | Jean-Michel Serres, Composer-pianist \(Apfel Café Music\): Website](#)

[Jean Sibelius – a short biography | Sibelius One](#)

[Finland's Finest: The Seven Symphonies Of Jean Sibelius : Deceptive Cadence : NPR](#)