

Why Sibelius's Fourth Symphony Is (Still) Not Popular

Even before I began my conservatory studies, I came into contact with Sibelius's 3rd and 7th symphonies. I bought an LP on a whim—without ever having heard of Sibelius—with a 1956 recording by Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic.

I found the music both impressive and mysterious, and both symphonies continued to captivate me. During my conservatory years in the 1970s, I bought the complete set of Sibelius symphonies in a cassette edition performed by Sir John Barbirolli with the Hallé Orchestra. Naturally, I discovered all the symphonies then, and since that time, Sibelius has been a mainstay of my musical preferences.

However, I initially felt the least connection with the Fourth. Many years later, I delved into it more deeply and came to the conclusion that this symphony, too, is a gem. But why is Sibelius's Fourth Symphony still not widely loved?

The lack of popularity of this symphony—written between 1910 and 1911—is largely due to the stark contrast it presents with the lush romanticism usually expected of symphonic music. Instead of grandeur or lyrical beauty, the Fourth offers a plunge into somber introspection, with a musical language that feels austere and at times unsettling. Listeners often describe the work as gloomy or alienating—qualities that challenge conventional audience expectations.

Another reason is its rejection of traditional form and harmonic stability. Sibelius avoids triumphant climaxes and clear harmonic resolutions, which are typical of romantic symphonies. Instead, the structures are compressed, and the tonalities often ambiguous—partly influenced by his experiments with the tritone and modernist elements. The lack of recognizable melodies or rhythmic drive can make the work inaccessible to new listeners.

Finally, historical context also plays a role. The Fourth was composed during a difficult period in Sibelius's life, marked by personal illness and existential anxiety. Its somber tone reflects these circumstances. Unlike his more popular Second or Fifth symphonies, the Fourth offers little in the way of familiar emotions or hope—an unwieldy starting point for concert programming that often aims to appeal to a broad audience.

Sibelius's Fourth Symphony is a radical departure from his earlier works. It consists of four movements and opens with a raw theme introduced by the cellos, immediately setting a dark, introspective tone. Notable is the frequent use of the tritone—an interval that evokes tension and instability.

The orchestration is sparse but masterfully controlled, evoking a sense of isolation. The second movement offers brief irony and lightness, but this is soon overshadowed by the relentless seriousness of the following movements. The finale does not end in triumph, but rather retreats into ambiguity, concluding in a whispering, unresolved mood. It is more a psychological landscape than a narrative—a reflection of an inner world, rendered in sound.

Hopefully, this symphony will one day find a permanent place in the core repertoire.

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