

### William Grant Still

*Threnody: In Memory of  
Jean Sibelius*

First performance: 1965

Approximate duration: 6 minutes

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A *threnody* is a song written to express sadness after someone's death. In this case, the Black American composer William Grant Still (1895–1978) wrote a threnody in honor of the Finnish composer Jean Sibelius (1865–1965). Though the two composers lived on different continents and were separated by a generation, they both believed in bringing the everyday music of their culture into orchestral music. For Sibelius, that was Finnish folk music. He wove the folk music of Finland into symphonies and symphonic poems like *Finlandia*. For Still, it was the music of Black Americans including spirituals and the blues. When Sibelius heard Still's *Afro-American Symphony*, the Finnish composer declared, "He has something to say!"

Still wrote this short *Threnody* for the 100-year anniversary of Sibelius' birth. Still covers a lot of emotional territory in this six-minute piece. It begins with a short brass fanfare, grabbing the listener's attention. It then quickly pulls back to a sad melody that sounds like a spiritual. A solemn march-like section occurs in the middle, with percussion and brass instruments playing a heavy beat. The spiritual-like section returns before the piece fades to a quiet end.

### Sergei Prokofiev

Symphony No. 2

Andantino; Allegretto

Scherzo: Vivace

Intermezzo: Allegro moderato

Finale: Allegro tempestoso

Yeol Eum Son, piano

First performance: 1915

Approximate duration: 30 minutes

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A *concerto* is a work for solo instrument with orchestra. The soloist—in this case the pianist—performs at the front of the orchestra in a work that showcases the soloist's and their instrument's abilities. Concertos often include *cadenzas*, which are usually short, virtuosic solos unaccompanied by the orchestra.

This concerto has four *movements* (large sections) instead of the typical three. And Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953) included long *cadenzas* in both the first and fourth movements. The first movement's *cadenza* is five minutes long! Prokofiev was a pianist, and he performed this work many times. Yet even he complained about how much time and work it took to learn the part that he had written.

Critics writing about the first performances of this work were creative in their dislike. One wrote that “cats on the roof make better music” and another said that the audience members were “frozen with fright, hair standing on end.” One suggested that the long, difficult *cadenzas* were composed by “emptying an inkwell on the page.” But many also commented that this music, which seemed futuristic to the audiences of the 1910s and 1920s, would likely stand the test of time and become beloved by musicians and audiences.

### Jean Sibelius

#### Symphony No. 5

Tempo molto moderato; Allegro moderato

Andante mosso, quasi allegretto  
Allegro molto

First performance: 1915

Approximate duration: 30 minutes

[Listen](#)

Finnish composer Jean Sibelius (1865–1957) was so beloved in his country that the government declared his 50th birthday a national holiday. They asked him to write a symphony to honor the occasion. That work—Sibelius' Fifth Symphony—was premiered at a celebratory concert with the composer himself conducting. Sibelius, who by then had achieved fame both in Finland and internationally, was a source of national pride during a tumultuous time in Finland's history. From 1809 to 1917, Finland was ruled by the Russian Empire. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, Russia made repeated attempts to take away Finland's autonomy to integrate it fully into the Russian Empire. The Finnish people resisted, declared their independence in 1917, and fought for power in the Finnish Civil War of 1918. All this turmoil and upheaval occurred while Sibelius was composing and then revising his Fifth Symphony.

The *tempos* (speed of the music) of the three *movements* (large sections) of Sibelius' Fifth Symphony create a symmetrical structure. The first movement starts slow and ends fast. The second movement has a moderate tempo. And the third movement starts fast and ends slow. The third movement was inspired by a herd of swans. Sibelius wrote in his diary in April of 1915: "Today at ten to eleven I saw 16 swans. One of my greatest experiences. Lord God, that beauty!" If you listen carefully to the start of the third movement, you might hear the rustle of wings in the *tremolo* strings, when the string players move their bows quickly back and forth across the string, as if their bow is *trembling*. This is followed by a soaring, majestic melody played by the horns. It sounds like swans taking flight.

**Siblius' Fifth** will be performed on November 22, 2024, at Touhill Performing Arts Center at UMSL with Jonathon Heyward conducting.

## Activities To Enrich Student Learning

1. William Grant Still wrote a *threnody* to honor Jean Sibelius and express sadness about his death. If you had to write a threnody, who would it be about? It could be someone you know personally or someone famous. What musical elements would you use to express sadness about their death?
2. Prokofiev wrote his second Piano Concerto in 1912–1913 and played the piano at its first performance. A few years later, the score and all the parts were destroyed in a fire. In 1923, Prokofiev returned to the work, reconstructing what he remembered and rewriting parts he didn't to create the version that is performed today. Have you ever had something you worked on lost or destroyed? What did it feel like to have to start over? Do you think you could have done what Prokofiev did?
3. Jean Sibelius' fiftieth birthday was declared a national holiday in Finland. Sibelius was beloved in his country because he helped Finland express its national identity: he incorporated Finnish mythology, literature, and landscape into his works and then shared those works internationally, bringing attention to Finnish culture during a tumultuous time in its history. If our country was to declare a national holiday to honor a living, American musician, who do you think should be honored? Why?
4. Learn from the pros! Discuss how the experience of seeing and hearing the SLSO has informed your own music-making. What did you see or hear the SLSO musicians doing that you could strive toward, both individually and as an ensemble? What do you think it would take for you to perform with a professional music ensemble one day?
5. Art is meant to be critiqued, and audiences and critics don't always like the music that they hear. When Prokofiev's Piano Concerto premiered, many critics expressed their distaste for the music. When you attend a concert, you get to be the critic! Think about what you liked and didn't like about the music at this concert. You can use these prompts to frame your critique: "I noticed...", "I enjoyed...", "I wonder..."

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