

# Prokofiev and Sibelius: From Dark to Light

## Concert Guide



**St. Louis Symphony  
Orchestra**

Stéphane Denève, Music Director

### **Harald Sæverud**

*The Ballad of Revolt*

First performance: 1946

Approximate duration: 6 minutes

[Listen](#)

Harald Sæverud (1897–1992) was a Norwegian composer who lived through World War II. *The Ballad of Revolt* was written in 1943 in two versions: for solo piano and for orchestra. Sæverud wrote the ballad as well as three “War Symphonies” to protest Nazi Germany’s occupation of his homeland, Norway.

Try to hear how Sæverud uses music to express his resistance to the occupying forces. The piece opens slowly and quietly with long, ominous, minor chords in the strings that create a sense of desolation. Individual instruments in the orchestra cry out seemingly for help until they create a wall of noise. Then a solo violin cuts through with a more hopeful melody. More instruments take up the theme—or the main melody—and together they grow bolder as their voices unite for a common cause.

### **Sergei Prokofiev**

Violin Concerto No. 2

First performance: 1935

Approximate duration: 26 minutes

[Listen](#)

A *concerto* is a work for a solo instrument accompanied by an orchestra. The soloist—in this case the violinist—performs at the front of the orchestra in a work that showcases their technical abilities. Composers often write pieces for their friends, and Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) wrote this piece for the French violinist, Robert Soetens. Prokofiev gave Soetens exclusive rights to perform the work for a year. Prokofiev and Soetens went on a year-long concert tour, where Soetens performed the work forty times.

Since they planned to start their tour in Spain, Prokofiev added some Spanish musical elements to the dance-like third movement. It is mostly in 3/4 time, but occasionally the meter becomes uneven. The rhythms of the movement and the inclusion of castanets—a handheld percussion instrument that makes a clicking sound when two pieces of wood are struck together—give the movement a Spanish sound.

Soon after this concerto was premiered, Prokofiev returned to his homeland, Russia, which he had left 17 years before. At the time, Russia was known as the Soviet Union, and it was

### **Sergei Prokofiev** (continued) Violin Concerto No. 2

led by Joseph Stalin. Stalin and his government held great control over the country and did not allow for dissenting opinions. It was difficult to be a musician or artist in Soviet Russia because Stalin employed censors who were tasked with making sure all the music and art produced in Russia glorified Russia and the Soviet regime. Stalin's government lured Prokofiev back to Russia with the promise of work as a composer. For the rest of his life, Prokofiev had to constantly navigate the difficulties of composing music that would please the Russian government.

### **Jean Sibelius** Symphony No. 2

First performance: 1902  
Approximate duration: 43 minutes

[Listen](#)

Finnish composer Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) was so beloved in his country that the government declared his 50th birthday a national holiday. This is largely because his compositions were very nationalistic. His previous piece, *Finlandia* (1900), was one of seven pieces depicting Finnish history. Sibelius wrote his second symphony while traveling in Italy. It is debated whether or not it was also written with a patriotic message, but the Finnish people were drawn to the piece all the same.

A *symphony* is a composition usually written in four parts called *movements*, each with distinct tempos and moods. When performed, it is customary for there to be pauses between each movement with no applause. In Sibelius' second symphony, the third and fourth movements are performed *attacca*, meaning without pause. You'll notice that the music continues without a break between the third and fourth movements. Fourth movements in symphonies are usually very triumphant in nature. Listen to the transition from the third to the fourth movement of this symphony using the link provided above. If you start at 32:00, you'll hear a gradual build in volume, tempo, and intensity as tension mounts. The tension finally resolves at the start of the fourth movement, when a sweeping melody in the strings sounds at 33:12.

Prokofiev and Sibelius: From Dark to Light will be performed on October 24, 2025, with Tabita Berglund conducting.

## Activities To Enrich Student Learning

1. Many of Sibelius' pieces have become representative of the country of Finland. He often includes Finnish folk songs in his music to evoke a sense of familiarity for Finnish listeners, or creates sounds that call to mind the image of Finland's cold landscape. What musical elements would you use to represent your country or culture?
2. Sæverud, like other composers who lived through times of war and persecution, used music as a form of resistance. In his case, he was protesting the Nazis' occupation of his homeland, Norway. During the Holocaust, the Nazis persecuted Jewish people and others by taking away their homes, businesses, and livelihoods. They attempted to take away people's humanity. Continuing to practice culture and create art during the Holocaust was a form of resistance. According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, resistance may be thought of as "willful disobedience, such as continuing to practice religious and cultural traditions in defiance of the rules of creating art, music, and poetry inside ghettos and concentration camps." Sæverud's *Ballad of Revolt* was a direct example of this.

Can you think of instances where music has been used as protest? Do you think that music is an effective means of protest or resistance? Why or why not?

Learn more about composers impacted by the Holocaust through the SLSO's Digital Education Program, [Holocaust Composer Stories](#).

3. Below is the opening theme played by the strings in Sibelius' second symphony. It comes back throughout the first movement, sometimes hidden in the background. On a piano or your instrument of choice, play the theme for your students to get them familiar with it. Once they have learned the theme, play the recording of the first movement of Sibelius' symphony for your students. Instruct them to raise their hand each time they hear the theme.



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. Following the concert, complete the following statements with your students: "I noticed...", "I enjoyed...", "I wonder..."

[Explore other learning opportunities available through your SLSO.](#)