

**Las Vegas Philharmonic
2009-2010 Season
Program Notes**

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Masterworks I, September 12, 2009

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957), *Finlandia*, Op. 26

Certainly the best known of Sibelius' works, *Finlandia* is a symphonic poem that was one of seven pieces composed for the "Press Celebrations" in Finland during the years 1899-1900. What was understood, but not openly acknowledged, was that *Finlandia* was also a wordless protest against increasing Russian domination and control over the Finnish people. As such, this wonderful work became, and remains, an important national song of the Finnish people. Over the years, several sets of lyrics have been written for the hymn like central theme.

After the powerful, almost ominous introduction, *Finlandia* is structured in a three-part form, with the solemn yet proud central hymn surrounded by an aggressively rebellious theme. The coda is a splendidly heroic reprise of the hymn theme, signifying a victorious conclusion to Finland's struggle for independence.

Pyotr Tchaikovsky (1840-1893), *Violin Concerto in D*, Op. 35

Tchaikovsky had just gone through one of the most desperate and depressing periods in his life when he composed his *Violin Concerto*. Though totally repulsed by the thought of physical intimacy with a woman, he had agreed to marry a young conservatory student who idolized him. The marriage was a complete disaster, and within weeks, Tchaikovsky attempted suicide. Amidst this mess, he finished three of his most brilliant works: the opera *Eugene Onegin*, his *Symphony #4*, and the *Violin Concerto in D*. Completed in March of 1878, this concerto was not enthusiastically received by the press. Even contemporary violin soloists considered the writing impractical for the instrument, and the premiere of the concerto was delayed until 1881. Still, time has shown that this concerto is one of the most popular, beautiful, and poetic works of its kind.

Tchaikovsky's amazing gift for melody is evident in each movement of the concerto, and perhaps that is the most striking feature of the work. Each movement yields at least one theme, which is practically unforgettable. Yet structurally, the work is quite conventional. Indeed, the concerto is apparently modeled after the Mendelssohn E minor concerto, complete with the connected second and third movements. Tchaikovsky's virtuosic cadenza near the end of the first movement however, eclipses Mendelssohn's in sheer Post-Romantic spectacular effects. The *Violin Concerto in D* is a masterful virtuosic showpiece whose exuberant character totally belies the composer's actual state of mind. The work exudes pure, carefree joy from beginning to end.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), *Symphony #7 in A*, Op. 92

The 5th and 6th symphonies of Beethoven were landmarks in the history of symphonic music. Several sweeping innovations were introduced in those masterworks, to the degree that the symphony, as a form, would never again be regarded as simple

entertainment. One might have expected the experimentation to continue in the *Symphony #7*, but happily, Beethoven lets the listener take a brief break from the symbolism and depth of his most recent works, to delight in one of his most inspired melodic offerings. Everything about the sounds, the orchestrations, and the formal structure, are pure Beethoven. However, there is no attempt to guide the listener through a plot, or demonstrate a connection among movements at some subliminal level. Instead, Beethoven simply provides one engaging tune after the other, spontaneously presented and exquisitely set into the symphonic form.

The *Symphony #7* was completed in 1812, and premiered on December 8, 1813 with a dedication to Count Moritz von Fries. The premiere itself was an historic event: the concert was a benefit for injured veterans of the Battle of Hanau. The orchestra was an all-star ensemble that featured some of the most famous musicians of the day, including Antonio Salieri, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Johann Hummel, and bassist Domenico Dragonetti. The response to the symphony was very positive; in fact, the second movement had to be repeated as an encore.

The *Symphony #7* itself is a conventional four-movement design; this is worth noting because his previous symphony contained five. After an extended slow introduction, the main *vivace* theme takes over with dance like energy and zeal.

The second movement is a masterpiece of symphonic writing. A simple *allegretto* melody with an even simpler repeated rhythm of quarter and eighth notes is subjected to development through orchestrational layering and variation as only Beethoven could. Not since the Fifth Symphony has Beethoven taken such a small melodic motive and built it into a composition of such raw power and universal appeal.

The third movement is a classic Beethoven *scherzo*, complete with a delightfully contrasting Trio section. Despite the jubilant tempo and rhythms, the harmonic progressions provide the real humor and interest in this scherzo. It seems that around every corner, the tonality makes surprising shifts that tickle the senses. The Trio section is actually much slower, and takes on a feeling of surprising serenity and nobility. One almost forgets the jocular nature of the *scherzo*, until it barges through the door to close the movement. Or so it seems: the movement has a final reprise of the trio and a closing restatement of the scherzo theme.

The final movement is reckless abandonment in inimitable Beethoven fashion. An aggressive tempo and main theme, dynamic surges through the themes and development, percussive accents that are simply huge, all combine to provide an exhilaration that leaves the audience (and the orchestra) breathless. The Finale is a romp that is simply great fun – enjoy!