Symphony No. 5 in E-flat Major, Op. 82
Jean Sibelius
Born: December 8, 1865 – Hämeenlinna, Finland
Died: September 20, 1957 – Järvenpää, Finland

Piece Length: Approximately 35 minutes.

The first few decades of the 20th century saw a number of changes to Western classical music. The tonal system that was the organizing factor to most music from Johann Sebastian Bach to Johannes Brahms was being expanded by composers such as Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Gustav Mahler, and Richard Strauss. In the first few years of the 1910s, things were pushed further by two major milestones in modern music: 1912 and Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, a song cycle that is primarily atonal, and 1913 and Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps – Rite of Spring.* There was no way that the genre of the symphony could remain untouched. Mahler in particular expanded the scope of the work, once proclaiming "A symphony must be like the world. It must contain everything." Other composers such as Debussy avoided composing symphonies all together in an attempt to break away from classical tradition, although one could perhaps view a piece like *La Mer* a symphony.

Simultaneously, the world was also going through major changes. Industrialization was increasing the productivity and economies of many nations, urbanization was expanding, and nationalism and diplomatic tensions were growing among countries around the globe, leading to the start of World War I. With the fall of the Russian Monarchy in 1917, Finland declared its independence which led to a civil war the following year before its first constitution was enacted in 1919.

It is under these settings that Sibelius composed his Symphony No. 5 in E-flat Major, and much of the instability of the times both politically and musically seem to be reflected in this magnificent work. He was already a national hero in Finland for the way he expressed his country's identity through his music, being influenced by Finland's folklore and landscapes. In fact, the symphony was commissioned by the Finnish government in honor of Sibelius' 50th birthday, which was even declared a national holiday. While he was beloved in his native country, as well as admired in England and the United States, his international reputation and the reception to his music was starting to wane outside of these three countries. Many musicians and critics were openly hostile to his work due to the relative conservatism of his harmonic language when compared to the revolutionary works of composers like Schoenberg and Stravinsky. In fact, the composer, conductor, and theorist René Liebowitz went as far as to call Sibelius "the worst composer in the world." Over time, however, appreciation of his work, and his revolutionary approach to form grew. In the fantastic book on 20th Century Music, *The Rest is Noise*, Alex Ross tells the following anecdote:

> In 1984, the great American avant-garde composer Morton Feldman gave a lecture at the relentlessly up-to-date Summer Courses for New Music in Darmstadt, Germany. "The people who you think are radicals might really be conservatives," Feldman said on that occasion. "The people who you think are conservative might really be radical." And he began to hum the Sibelius Fifth [Symphony].

It is the ambiguous structure of the symphony that Feldman may be referring to. The composition went through three different iterations from the original, four-movement version that premiered December 8, 1915 to its final form, which was premiered November 24, 1919 by the Helsinki Philharmonic with Sibelius conducting. While the performance of the first version was a huge success, Sibelius was filled with extreme self-doubt, and spent years revising the piece. In its final form, he combined the first and

second movement of the original version into one, moving away from the more traditional, expected symphonic structure.

Sibelius once stated “I should like to compare the symphony to a river. It is born from various rivulets that seek each other, and in this way, the river proceeds wide and powerful towards the sea,” and this philosophy seems to inform the structure of this work. The first movement opens gently with a horn call that gives way to a few other small musical ideas that will evolve throughout the entire symphony: one presented by the oboes playing sixteenth-notes in parallel thirds and a short, three note gesture in the winds that is distinctive by its “short-long-short” pattern against the tremolo strings which play for the first time in this moment and provides the first instance of tension in the work. After a rising chorale-like idea played by the whole orchestra that acts as an aural cue that the section is about to end, Sibelius wraps up the first exposition with a coda that presents a faster version of the “short-long-short” idea with strong accents on the beat. This is where an exposition should end, however, he restates the ideas again in order, creating a second exposition, this time with more energy and excitement aided by the continued string tremolos.

Finally, a development section follows. In traditional sonata form development sections, most composers will take the material from the exposition and quickly move to a number of different keys while presenting only fragments of the previous melodies introduced earlier. This gives the music a great sense of instability and tension. Sibelius does something quite different and ingenious. In the development section of this movement, Sibelius creates instability not by traditional means, but by eliminating all sense of tonality. In other words, he refuses to allow you to hear any pitch as a tonal center. Throughout this section, the strings play rapid chromatic passages up and down, creating a sense of anxiousness and extreme tonal ambiguity. They then accompany more chromatic fragments in the bassoon that hint at the opening horn melody. At this point, it is nearly impossible to tell what key Sibelius is in, resulting in a moment that could be heard as truly atonal! After the “short-long-short” idea returns and unsettlingly moves to various keys, Sibelius arrives triumphantly to what should be the recapitulation by restating the opening horn idea in the trumpets accompanied by the entire orchestra in a bright and triumphant moment.

However, instead of continuing a recapitulation, this moment gives way to a Scherzo, a brighter and lighter section whose music is similar to the parallel third idea originally stated in the oboes. Hints of the previous themes dance and play throughout the orchestra. The joyous music starts to grow in tension once more through counterpoint, with multiple melodies happening simultaneously, before it all falls apart, when Sibelius breaks down the musical ideas until only very short fragments of the music bounce around the strings. As the momentum pushes towards the ending of the movement, Sibelius presents the chorale from the exposition three times: the first two times, the music seems to build and lose steam halfway through, but the third time it fulfills its promise, arriving at one of the most exhilarating codas in the symphonic literature where the music sits on page after page of E-flat major, propelling forward joyously until the fantastic, brilliant conclusion of the movement!

The second movement is no less ambiguous in form. It can be seen as a set of variations, but part of the ambiguity is a total question as to what the listener is supposed to focus on! In the winds, Sibelius presents a slow, beautiful chorale, but after its first phrase, the pizzicato strings introduce a melody that consists of five-note fragments. Stunningly, Sibelius gives no clear indication as to where each variation begins and ends. Rather, the music seems to flow from one variation to another, bringing to mind once again the quote about rivers from above. While he never indicates the specific variations, there are still clues in the score as to how one could break down the progression. Perhaps the first variation is when the winds start playing both the chorale and the five-note melody with the pizzicato strings. The second variation begins when the strings play an ornamented version of the five-note musical idea bowed,

giving the music gentle movement, while the chorale in the winds counters with unsettling dissonance. The third variation begins by introducing a more lyrical version of the five-note idea in the strings, before adding more movement. A fourth variation can be heard with the addition of tremolo celli and basses, while the horns take up the chorale idea, giving the music a sense of grandeur not yet seen in this movement. This gives way to what could be heard as the fifth variation, which is a playful conversation using the five-note idea between the winds and violins that seems to want to dance. However, underneath this is a drone in the horns that goes back and forth between dissonant and consonant harmonies, creating, once again, underlying tension similar to the winds in the second variation. The music then momentarily calms down before the sixth variation in which the strings play just the rhythm of the five-note idea pizzicato with the flutes against a horn drone that crescendos to overwhelm the music before hinting at the original horn call theme of the first movement. This leads to what could be seen as a seventh variation in which the solo oboe takes over the five-note theme against tremolo strings. The music then continues to calm down as the strings once again play the five-note theme lyrically against the chorale idea in the winds and brass before the winds alone – finally - wrap up the movement gently by combining both ideas into a chorale.

We've reached the finale, whose form might be as simple as ABAB... but Sibelius has abandoned simple. It opens with extraordinary excitement through a rapid, energetic theme played in the tremolo strings before presenting the second theme, known as the "Swan Theme," arguably the most famous melody of the symphony, presented in the horns. This theme was inspired by a particular moment that Sibelius wrote about in his diary on April 21, 1915: "Today I saw 16 swans. God, what beauty! They circled over me for a long time. Disappeared into the solar haze like a silver ribbon." The string tremolo section returns and is extended, with occasional hints at both the opening horn idea in the first movement as well as the "Swan Theme." For a moment, both ideas seem to be working together, with the strings playfully presenting the "Swan Theme" against a melody in the flutes and clarinets. Soon, the music transforms into a final slow lyrical section taken over by the "Swan Theme." Here, the dynamics of the music ebbs and flow: it is gradually getting louder, but seems to take two steps forward, and one step back, the effect of which sounds almost like a tide gradually coming in. As the music seems to be coming to its triumphant conclusion, Sibelius presents one last ingenious moment that was not present in the original version of the symphony: six chords presenting the foundation of the "Swan Theme" separated by long silences that bring the symphony to its dramatic, brilliant conclusion.