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The Scaramouche by Jean Sibelius

The extensive oeuvre of incidental music by Jean Sibelius is very rarely performed, and hardly ever as a stage production, except for pieces Finlandia and Valse Triste. The performers of Sibelius' own era, like theater orchestras, and presentation formats, like ballet pantomime, no longer exist.

As a conductor who is interested in contacts between different fields of arts, I seek to find such ways of presentation for the incidental music of Sibelius that might be functioning and fascinating in modern context, so that these exceptionally fine works would find their way to concert programs.

The ballet pantomime Scaramouche (Op. 71, 1913) is one of the most extensive music pieces of Sibelius. Scaramouche has been originally composed to a libretto with Commedia del arte influences, written by Poul Knutsen. This music work is situated in an interesting phase in the life of Sibelius, and also in his history as a composer. After the cold reception of the 4th Symphony, he did not quite know on what course to proceed. Sibelius envisioned different opera schemes, but they did not come to be. Seeing "Salome" by Strauss did not raise his self-esteem.

On the home front, Sibelius was wrestling with "economica." "My home peace and family happiness are at end because I cannot earn money... What a hell." The thoughts that intensified into self-destructive contemplations were aggravated by his psychiatrist brother becoming sick with "overstress and anemia." "The mind very sick... a gunshot would now be the best for me."

Scaramouche is the most original, but the least known great work of Sibelius - a sort of forgotten treasure. The music is in many places radical and comes with dissonance, perhaps showing Sibelius at his wildest. On the other hand, it contains long, almost entertainment-like dance sequences.

Judging by the diary entries, composing this work caused lots of pain for Sibelius. He wrote in 21.6.1913: "Signing the Scaramouche contract has destroyed me... In rage, I struck the telephone broke... my whole world reputation is at stake."

The reviews of premier performance described the music as ingenious: "The music fascinated and conjured forth magical droning, it swooshed and howled its freezing pain. The unsearchable and eternal mystery of passion was manifested in dark mysticism and incomprehensible vision. The music had simultaneously the inventiveness, ruthless force and demonic wildness of the Finnish master, as well as his almost perverse refinement". (Politiken 13.5.1922)

The music of Scaramouche is challenging, considering the concert performance. It requires stage element perhaps more than any other work of Sibelius. At the halfway through the work, the music begins to repeat and develop what has already been heard, and it fragments, thins and even almost stops.

Due to the solidness of drama and current concert norms, I have condensed the music into roughly a half of its original duration of more than an hour. I have added few fierce outbreaks from the middle of the work as the prologue of the current presentation. After that, the music proceeds in a chronological order, jumping over the repeating and stalled sequences. This modification of music is part of the artistic doctorate I am preparing about the incidental music of Sibelius, and it has happened with the permission of the Sibelius estate.

The researchers have often claimed that Sibelius often took on such subjects that mirrored his own life. One can get a more authentic view the personal history of Sibelius and his composing work by studying his diaries and extensive correspondence. These texts, written in a lively manner, gave me the idea of replacing the libretto of Knutsen entirely with Sibelius' own texts, that is, with the diary entries associated with the composition of Scaramouche and the correspondence he had with his wife Aino at the different phases of his life. I have also kept in mind the main turns of the original libretto when choosing these texts.

The fictitious story I have formed from the text excerpts I gathered has been the basis and script of the dramatization of Scaramouche. The goal of this visualization, realized by cinematic means, has been the dialogue of music, image and text, in an organic, aesthetic, and contentful manner. The picture narration refers to the symbolistic and dream-like soul scenery of Scaramouche that moves in the counter-currents of realism and subconscious.