

DEFENCE OF A GENIUS

THE 80th birthday of the Finnish composer Sibelius occurred last December, and listeners may remember that Station 2YA played his Sixth symphony to mark the occasion. Now, we have just received English periodicals for December containing references to the same occasion, from which it can be seen that at least two prominent radio critics found it necessary to spring to the defence of Sibelius. Evidently there is some anti-Sibelius feeling in England, although his music is listened to there much more than it is in other European countries. Edward Sackville West, writing in the *New Statesman and Nation*, felt the need to say "... after last week's concerts, I think it would be hard for any open-minded and sensitive critic, of any nation ... to deny the imaginative intensity, the masterly composition ... of *Tapiola*, *The Swan of Tuonela*, and the later symphonies."

And then, in the *BBC Listener* of December 20, W. McNaught devoted his column *Broadcast Music* to saying "shoo" to the anti-Sibelians. Here is what he wrote:

"THE clumsy great clown!" was the answer I got when I put it to a friend of mine that there might be some merit in Sibelius' music. Now don't pass sentence hastily. Those words of scorn were uttered by a musician of parts and discernment who had come from one of the great continental centres and had a lively appreciation of such originals as Mahler, Busoni, Strauss, Debussy and Moussorgsky. So it was not that he lacked response to the abnormal and

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copper-mine at Ashio was unfit for human beings to work in. That was one of the places Allied prisoners had to work in this time, and we had to investigate the conditions. I think it's a point of great significance—40 years ago there was open agitation by a socialist group for better treatment of prisoners, and so on. Of course the paper was suppressed in due course, but it was one of the pieces of evidence we had of the existence at some time of a more liberal Japanese opinion. The name of the paper was *Heimin Shimbun*."

On his way home, Mr. Bertram took a detour to see China again. His time there was cut down to three days instead of the week he had hoped for, but he did see Madame Sun, and the old China battlefields, and Hong Kong. Then he came back here via Saigon, Borneo, and Darwin, and reached Auckland on February 16. His next move now is to go away on his own somewhere in New Zealand to write a book. That will take several months. In the meantime we are allowed to say that we have the expectation of some more articles from him, and perhaps we may print the photograph taken by an American news photographer at the moment when he removed the boards from the cell at Omori on which he had written "A prisoner ought never to pardon his cell" (Spender), "Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage" (Lovelace), and "Freedom is a bourgeois illusion" (Lenin).

adventurous. Many share his antipathy; there are indeed whole nations by whom Sibelius is rejected, a fact that has to be faced even on his eightieth birthday. (The case is far from being unique; we are always facing the fact that Elgar has little following abroad; and the Austrian idol, Bruckner, cuts no ice in England.) And since the master's faults loom so large in the European scene, I see no reason why we of the Sibelian faith should deny them. Let us, on the contrary, frankly envisage, discuss and even exaggerate them. It can do no harm. At any moment the master can shoo us away with a half-page of symphony or symphonic poem.

He is clumsy. He blurts, mouths and gabbles. Call him an orchestrator! Listen to those crowds of notes that come tumbling over each other, so that you can't hear what is going on. His musical manners are sometimes atrocious. As for his form and procedure, many attempts are made to rationalise them. The most frequently heard excuse is (in short) that he reverses the usual process by presenting his themes in snatches and gradually building them up instead of presenting them whole and then shredding them out. To describe the process is not to vouch for it; moreover, its workings will be found to occupy but a small portion of any Sibelius programme. In some important and famous movements it does not come into operation at all. A habit of his that takes far more of our attention is that of seizing upon a passing idea and worrying it at some length until the time comes to pick up another idea and worry that one and so on until the time comes to end the movement. Is that a way to write a symphony? It is how the first movement of the *fifth* is put together; and most of *Tapiola*. And while we are overdoing it, look at the triviality of so many of his tunes; that, I suppose, is where the "clown" comes in.

Altogether it need not surprise us that a good many people of light and leading and high musical breeding take a poor view of Sibelius. They are unwilling to forgive his surface offences, to acknowledge the presence of something big and stirring and disturbing that is beating down their defences without and within. Just so, one can imagine, certain concert-goers in old Vienna fought against that other clumsy great clown, Beethoven. The other day somebody was urgently denying or asserting—I forget which—that Sibelius was Beethoven's true successor. That, it seems to me, is precisely what he is, in this important matter of character and genius that carry off any kind of misbehaviour. Personally, and in common with the bulk of the English musical world, I don't care if he does make aggressive war on the art of music, for he wins, and as long as he is in charge the art of music is all the better for it. (It is those atonalists-and-nothing-else who have lost their battle.) Why he wins, I don't know, in spite of reading all the essays that have put it so clearly. As I remarked a few weeks ago, the part of music that matters is the part that you cannot describe. Sibelius, we here remind ourselves quite unnecessarily, wrote that matchless piece "The Swan of Tuonela" and the last movement of the fourth symphony, and of the fifth—what stuff it is! Shoo!



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